JIMMY BUTLER NERLENS NOEL BEN WALLACE

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SPECIAL FINALS BLOWOUT

YUP.

STEPHEN, IGGY & THE DUBS COOK UP A TITLE

THE YEAR IN PHOTOS

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IN THE PAINT

SLAM no. 191 | SEPTEMBER 2015



ROSTER

36. I Pledge Allegiance to the Grind

Relatively unheralded in high school and college after a tough childhood, ***Jimmy Butler*** has literally worked his way to NBA stardom.

40. Cornerstone Promotion

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PG. 48
A look back at some of the greatest moments of the 2014-15 season.

Cover: Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images; This page: Jesse D. Garrabrant/NBAE via Getty Images


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IN THE PAINT

SLAM no. 191 | SEPTEMBER 2015



FRONTCOURT

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Love for Kobe Bryant. Hate for Kobe Bryant. Some things never change.

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He's not (D)a Kid anymore.

PG. 76

St. Louis' Jayson Tatum takes over a very special spot in Punks.

IMAGE **ATIBA JEFFERSON**



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THE SIXTH MAN



I have a really good friend, Joe, who listens to sports radio, watches tons of games on TV and is down to go to anything in person—provided he has a connect or tix are cheap. This means lots of baseball and the occasional meaningless Knick or Net game. NBA Playoffs or the Finals though? Not in his budget. He loves asking me about my experience at said games, though. Thankfully, I've had a lot, but for a variety of personal and work reasons, I didn't get to a single Finals game in 2011-14 (the LeBron/Miami years). Even before this year's schedule was set, I had my heart set on getting to at least one game. Firstly, because I knew Cavs-Warriors would be incredibly entertaining, and secondly, because the NBA did a neat thing that further drove interest in the Finals.

As you probably saw on any number of social media feeds, the League—specifically our man Barry Parasram—took the awesome Larry O'Brien Championship Trophy on a world tour of sorts, letting celebrities and lots of media outlets spend some quality time with the trophy that our NBA heroes devote so much blood, sweat and tears into chasing. We were one of the lucky outlets, and it was fun as hell. No, none of us will ever know the feeling of earning a touch with a 17-point fourth quarter like Stephen Curry, but we do know what the trophy feels like, how we look in its shiny reflection and more.

Once the Finals did kick off, we were all over the action. As you can read beginning on pg. 42, we had people at every single game. I was the fortunate one who got to attend Game 5 in Oakland, when Curry had the aforementioned 17-point explosion as the Warriors overcame LeBron James' absurd 40-point triple-double and took firm hold of the series for the first time. As for my buddy Joe, who wants to know, "What's it like at a Finals game?!"... it's awesome. There is an energy in the locker room and in the stands unlike any regular-season or Playoff game (in any sport). Even being part of the "social conversation," as I/SLAM were throughout the Finals, is exhilarating when you're at the game. All in all, let me offer a hearty "Job well done" to Barry, Jim Ice, Adam Silver and everyone at the NBA who makes the Finals so special.

Peace,

Ben Osborne



OFF THE BENCH Christopher Cason

Born and raised in Chicago, our man Chris' first true loves were basketball and storytelling. While dreaming of being the first high school-to-pro PG (kidding/not kidding), Chris grew up reading SLAM, always checking for a Scoop Jackson or Russ Bengtson feature, and visualizing the day when his words would grace these very pages if his preps-to-pros dream didn't work out. Chris got his big professional break while covering the NBA pre-Draft Combine in '09. Since then he's delivered hoops-related content for several sites and publications—*Sole Collector*, CSNChicago.com and *HOOP*—besides SLAM, which he graces with a Jimmy Butler feature (pg. 36), this month. You can keep tabs on him on most social sites @C4DUNK.

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LEGEND STATUS

Great job on the Throwback Issue SLAM! It shows you guys remember one of the greatest ones to ever play the game.
Charles Nesbitt // via Facebook
Always.—Ed.

Funny how people forget how great Kobe was. People these days judge him off his past few seasons smh.
RONALD BUCKHANON // VIA FACEBOOK

Kobe is the best I ever saw, and he's not a freak athlete like LeBron. He just worked harder and wanted it more than anyone.
JEFFREY GARRITY // VIA FACEBOOK
No comment.—Ed.

Kobe's selfish ass never made anyone better. He couldn't take any team LeBron's been on to the Finals…including the Heat.
ERIC DUNCAN // VIA FACEBOOK
No comment.—Ed.

I just want to say that SLAM is the best sports magazine. I like how you guys give everybody a fair shake—not just the stars. Also I like how you cover the Old School players to give a l'il history and the PUNKS to give us a glimpse of the future.
TRISTIAN CHAMBERS // AZ
Thanks dude. I could not have written our print mission any clearer myself.—Ed.

I have been a SLAM supporter since Grant Hill graced the April 1997 cover, when Tony G was still in charge and Scoop pushed pen to paper and made me feel with every word he wrote. When middle school dreams were centered around the day I was published in Trash Talk. I tried each month to no avail until the issue with LBJ on the cover. Irony aside since I am not a LeBron fan, I was so proud of that moment.

As a baller and a fan since I was 10 (I'm 31), I have always cheered for my home team, the new NBA Champion Golden State Warriors. I cried with every bracket jump they made and I've been in a surreal state for days since they brought the good ole Larry back home.

In the name of SLAM's long history of providing emotional articles in a much-loved magazine that is known for stepping over boundaries and setting trends, please do the Warriors (and me) justice by featuring not just our Finals MVP (Andre) and/or League MVP (Steph) in the wake of their success. I kindly suggest you do a team cover—I would be forever indebted to you. Don't make like *SI*, *ESPN* or any other magazine that will probably feature one player (two at most) when it is about the heart and soul of the team. Thanks for being awesome.
TAMMY // VIA EMAIL
**Gritted teeth emoji.*—Ed.*

What it do up in the SLAM Dome? Let's be honest…Trash Talk has been slacking HARDER than Lakers management. Now for the true shit: Y'all cocky ass Warriors fans had no worries… neither would I if it was my TEAM against ONE playboy!
RAY AGUAYO // VIA EMAIL

SMH. Why the hell did y'all downsize from two pages to one tiny little section? Trash Talk for me and I'm sure many others with similar circumstances has always been something to look forward to each month. Now it's hella small with forgettable comments from 'Bustaz' mostly on Facebook. WTF?!

Are you purposely omitting the voices of those of us stuck on the other side of the fence? Listen, Trash Talk used to be a forum for us convicts to get our soap boxes and rant-n-rave about what we felt was important. I've read the countless complaints of those out in the free world bitch and moan about how tiresome it is to see or hear from people like me. As if to suggest that people incarcerated are beneath those who happen to be out and about. What makes us less worthy or appealing to the eye? I don't expect an honest answer as to why you've changed the best thing next to the articles. Just- no wait, JUST DO THE RIGHT THING SLAM, fix the biggest mistake you guys made not

TAG YOUR PICS #MYSLAM



INSTAGRAM OF THE MONTH
@isaiahaustin
Blessings on blessings on blessings! @emmanuelmudiay #FLSLAMDraftSuite #NewYork

letting us incarcerated folks know how to order the "Special Collector's Edition" mags with no internet access. Make Trash Talk two pages again.
MOSES THOMPSON // ELOY, AZ
I think we all came back in a big way this month. It's partly on me anyway for okaying one-page Trash sections. We'll try and stick with two.—Ed.

Kobe will always be a legend to Laker fans.
KRISTIAN M. BASINANG // VIA FACEBOOK

WIGGIN' OUT

I just wanted to send you guys some love for putting my boy Wiggy on the cover! I'm a lifelong T-Wolves fan and have been a subscriber to your guys' magazine since 2001. Seeing Da (New) Kid on the cover brought back great memories from the prime days of Da (Original) Kid, KG. [*Pic above right.—Ed.*] Things have been...well...pretty tough for my Wolves over the past decade. But I genuinely think we've got some things to be optimistic about: Wiggy is already looking real (woof, I mean, really real–his spin move out of the high post..!!), I love the potential and camaraderie I'm seeing from pups like LaVine and Shabazz, I'm pretty confident KG is going to instill some kind of insanity in Bennett or Payne, AND we masterfully tanked our way to the 1st pick. So, yeah, I'm believing that next year might be something special for this squad we're developing. Or maybe I'm just a crazy Timberpups fan who follows Alexey Shved on YouTube and actually thinks he's a real hooper who everyone just gave up on way too soon. Either way, here's hoping for many more buckets to come for Wiggy.
NATHAN TANG // VANCOUVER, WA

I have to give you guys props on Issue 189. While everyone else in the NBA media has gone Splash Bros/King James/Fear The Beard crazy, you guys took it to another level and brought real basketball fans refreshing material. If I had to hear one more argument about who the "real MVP" is one more time...

Anyways, as a Canadian, I was waiting for an Andrew Wiggins cover, but to be honest I was surprised (yet very excited) it was this year. Not saying you jumped the gun, I love the fact that he is getting the fame he deserves. Hopefully there are more Wiggins covers in the future. I enjoyed the Tobias Harris article, too. His work ethic is amazing and you can see a star being born as you guys reported. Keep doing your thing, SLAM.
BRENDAN // ST. JOHN'S (HOME OF CARL ENGLISH–REMEMBER HIM?)
Barely?—Ed.

What up SLAM FAM? Just got #189. Nice piece of work, great cover as well. I think "AW" (Andrew Wiggins) has the makings of young T-Mac. He just needs a jump shot. But then again, he's just a baby. He has a long way to go. Until next time, SLAM FAM. Much love, Mr. Ed.
TAY DA GR8 // BUNKER HILL, IN

That Aussie Ball article in Issue 189 was dope. It is so popular here and has grown so much the past 10 years. Our Rugby League and football backgrounds give us gritty hustle plays and put our bodies on the line. Those calling Dellavedova a dirty player don't know shit. Hustling for a loose ball and getting to the floor before your opponents is labeled "dirty" by Americans on Twitter. Game 3 of the Finals he showed pure hustle diving on EVERY loose ball and winning the battles. Who dives for a ball in the second row up by 17? Delly does. It's the way you're raised here. Everyone in the US says



the game is going soft yet when someone hustles their ass off to get a loose ball and his opponent can't get to the floor quick enough and gets hurt, he is intentionally hurting him? Smh. Theres a reason the best player on the planet loves him. Keep doing you, Delly.
MORGAN // FREMANTLE, AUSTRALIA

It was so good to read an article about Australian basketball, but why no mention of Lauren Jackson? I remember you had a brief article on her a few years back. The thing is, she's a three-time WNBA MVP. Think of the NBA players who won at least three MVPs—Michael, Kareem, Magic, Bill, Wilt, Moses, LeBron. I don't have to use last names. Not mentioning Lauren Jackson is like having an article about African basketball without mentioning Hakeem or Dikembe.
BEN // MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

I just renewed my subscription for 3 years. Charles Barkley can't hate on the "jump-shooting" Warriors any longer. They have something he never achieved. Kiss the ring, CB. I'm from Oakland and been a fan of the Dubs since '86. This championship is great for the city of Oakland and the Bay Area. SLAM, can you show Oakland/Bay Area some love like you do cities like NYC, Chi, Philly, LA, DMV and Sea? We have ballers that have shined with the best of them. Bill Russell, Gary Payton, Jason Kidd, Dame Lillard, JR Rider, Antonio Davis, Brian Shaw, Drew Gooden, Leon Powe, Ray Young, Raymond "Circus" King, "Hook" Mitchell, Darnell "Tank" Robinson and Eddie House just to name a few. Shout out to Ben Osborne and his 14-15 NBA preview in Ish 183. Ben picked GS finished 43-39. Mr. Osborne, do you still think you can coach this GS team and "only scare some teams in the Playoffs"? Kerr should have been Coach of the Year. Down 2-1 to Memphis, he put Bogut on Allen. Down 2-1 to Cleveland, he sat Bogut and went small. Draymond should have won DPOY. How was Klay #29 in SLAM's NBA Top 50? Behind Rondo & Dragic at 26 & 27 respectfully? Greatest coaching decision ever in NBA history, Kerr taking the GS job over the Knicks job. Y.A.Y. A.R.E.A!!!
JA'MARIO "BIG O" OLIVER // VIA NEW BOSTON, TX
I said I couldn't judge the Dubs without bias after they did Mark dirty.—Ed.

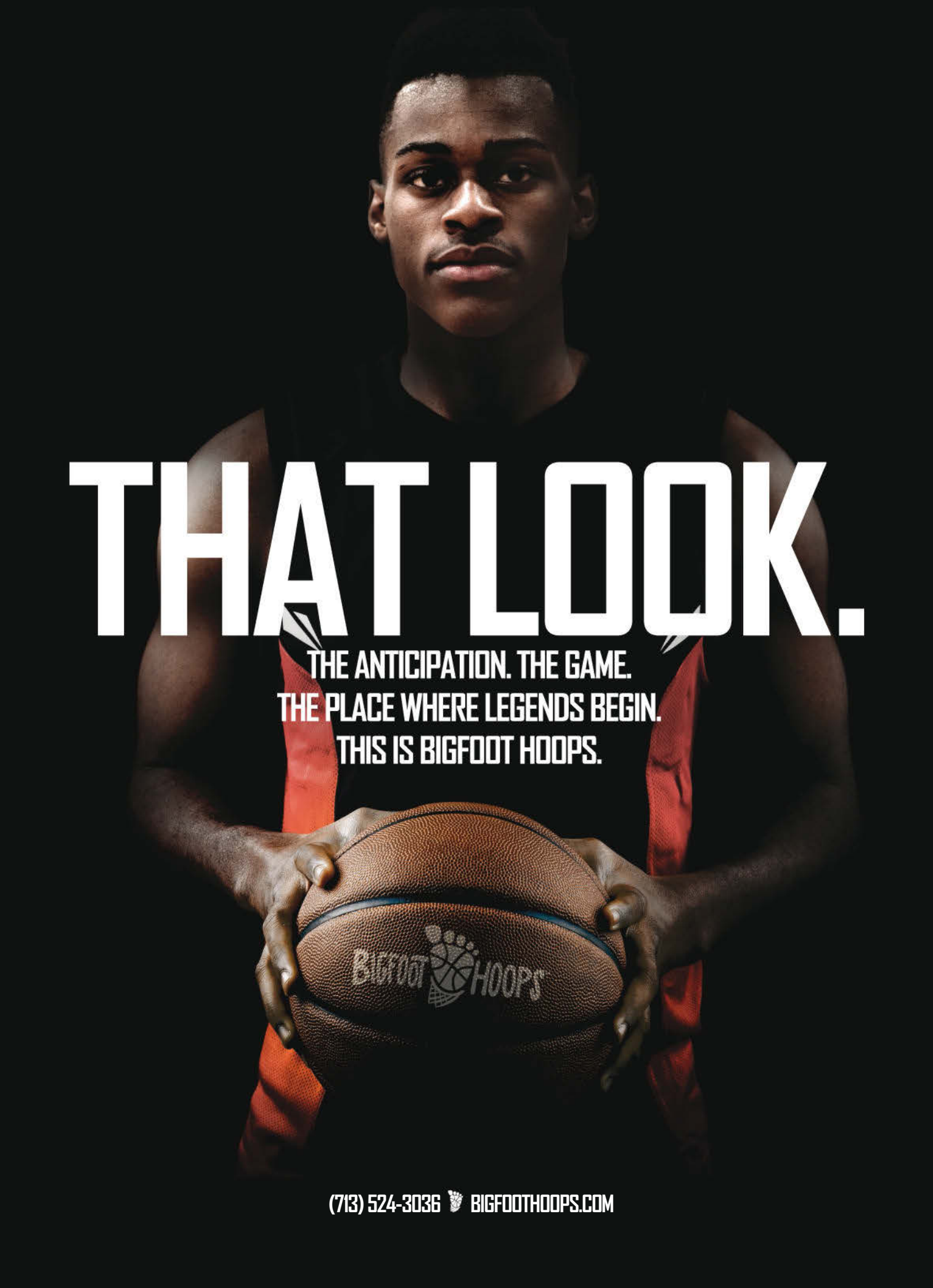
The time has come for you guys to print 12 issues a year. During the season, there's endless amounts of things happening. In the offseason, we can't get enough of what is to come and just want to take a nap until the preseason starts! So what's the meaning of this? Do you need more employees? Writers? Photographers? What is it already? I demand an answer from you people! 8 issues is just not an option. K Good talk...Now. Go. Make. It. Happen. Bye.
CHASE PINTER, DIEHARD SUFFERING KNICKS FAN // BROOKLYN NY
Well, we do 10 + KICKS (not eight), and the biggest concern we'd have in going up more is securing advertisers who will support more issues. If you can do that, we will do more—and give you a commission!—Ed.

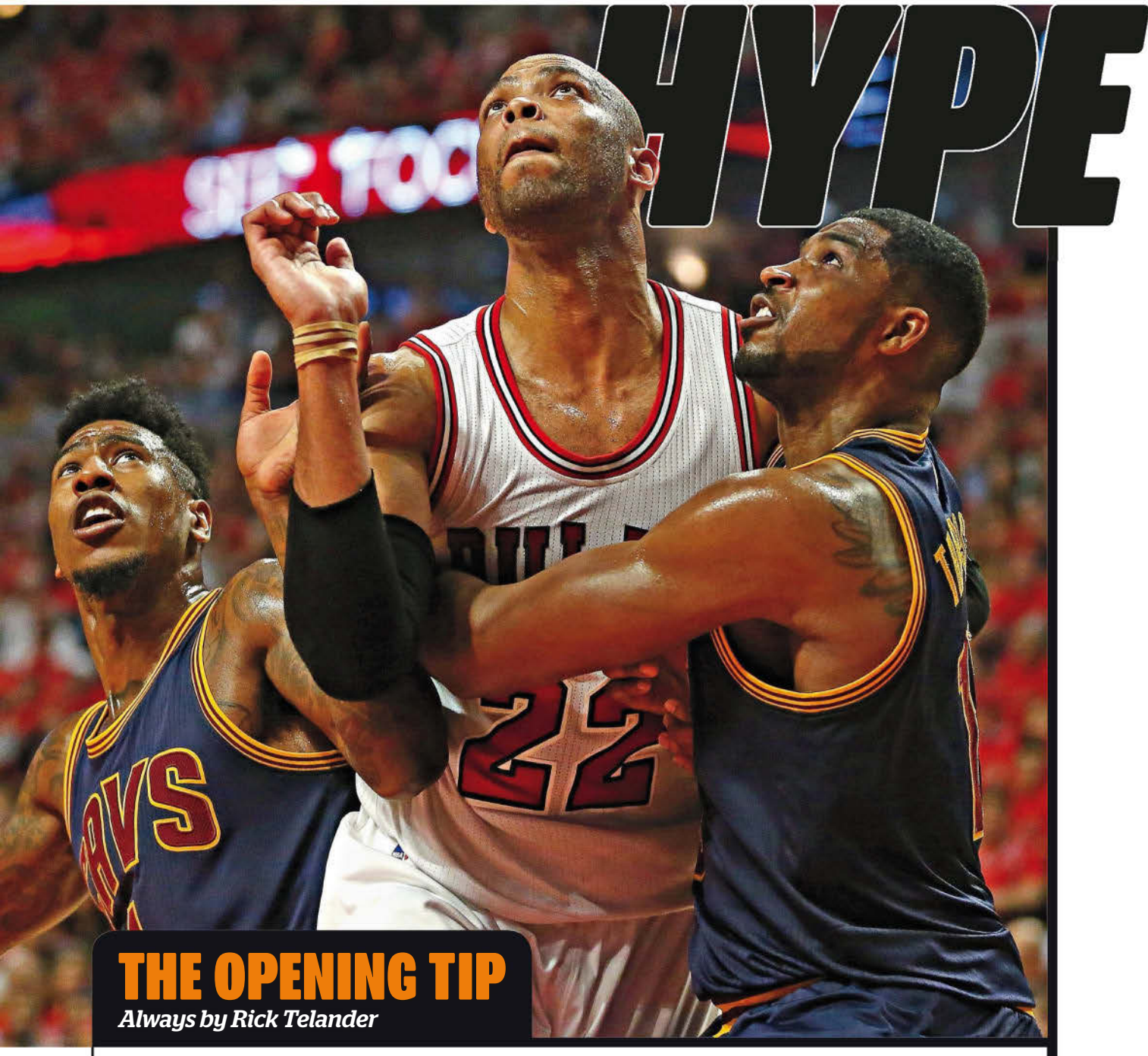
TWEET OF THE MONTH



Ricky Rubio @rickyrubio9 · 2h
Hello @KarlTowns !! You ready to pick up my dry cleaning tomorrow ?? #WelcomeRook

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THE OPENING TIP

Always by Rick Telander

Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images

See these guys? They're dancing. The rugged rhumba started as a tangle—excuse me, tango—with the Cavs' Iman Shumpert asking the Bulls' Taj Gibson if he'd like to dance. Gibson batted his eyelashes and said yes. This created jealousy for the Cavs' Tristan Thompson, right, who promptly cut in and put a man-hug on Gibson. The Bulls forward/center appears to be signaling the waiter for a cocktail while preparing to embrace Thompson in a romantic headlock.

Actually, this is a routine rebounding situation in a typical NBA game, where grabbing, elbowing, arm-locking and near-pants-ing has become the norm. I don't like this. I don't like it all. Every sport, if you let it, will become football. (And football, unfettered, will become criminal.) Such brutality is not why basketball was invented. If you own a spot on the floor, you cannot be knocked or shoved or big-butted out of that spot without a foul occurring. You can't grab or forearm people. You can't chicken fight and grapple. There are likely three fouls going on in this photo, if any ref had the courage or directive or cojones to call them. I know the League's rebuttal: You want the game slowed down, players thrown out and endless marching back and forth to shoot free throws? No. But the return to basketball must start somewhere. What you see here is not Dr. Naismith's game.

And if this brutality continues, it will lead to something ugly and bad. Indeed, it already has. When Celtics center Kelly Olynyk locked up with Cavs power forward Kevin Love in a late-April Playoff game and essentially yanked Love's left arm out of its socket, he not only sent Love off to surgery, he ruined Cleveland's chance at the city's first NBA title.

For the love of the game, all you NBA powers—and I'm looking straight at you, Adam Silver—stop this pro wrestling.

INSIDE: **JR SMITH** flies...somewhere /// **DIRK** gets the doc treatment /// **HANNIBAL BURESS** graces us with his presence /// **OTTO PORTER** + more...

IN YOUR FACE

WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

JORDAN CLARKSON

Los Angeles Lakers, 6-4, G

Since the 1981-82 NBA season, the League has presented its Rookie of the Month award to the top rookie of each conference. The Lakers have drafted 54 rookies during this time, but only one has ever become Western Conference Rookie of the Month.

"To me, receiving the award is just a sign of the hard work throughout the season," Lakers rookie Jordan Clarkson says. "I wasn't playing early, but my coaches continued to push me to get better and be ready."

This opportunity came in spurts early on, as the former Mizzou guard spent the first part of the season going back and forth between the Lakers and their D-League affiliate.

"I knew it would be a process," Clarkson says. "I knew if I was going to get an opportunity, I was going to have to wait for my time and then make the most of it."

Clarkson did more than simply make the most of it. During March, when he was named ROTM, he scored in double figures in 14 of 16 games while averaging 15.8 ppg, 5.2 apg and 4.8 rpg. The 46th pick in the 2014 NBA Draft joined Stephen Curry, John Wall and Russell Westbrook as the only players this season to have at least 26 points, 11 assists, 6 rebounds and 3 steals in one game.

"In terms of being a pure point, Chris Paul is probably the best point guard to watch," Clarkson says. "Wall, Westbrook and Steph Curry also have parts to their games I try to watch. Tony Parker is another."

Although Clarkson was the Lakers' lone bright spot this season, he remains excited for what lies ahead.

"I'm really excited to play with Julius [Randle]," Clarkson says. "I've spent a lot of time with Julius even when we haven't been playing. Simply talking to him on the bench or in the locker room and seeing his energy gets me excited about being on the court with him. I can't wait to get to work for next season."—JAY WALLIS



Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

In case you don't follow on Ed. on Twitter (which would hardly make you unique), he wanted to reiterate the NBA Finals thank you he did: Huge shouts to Rajah Allarey, Brendan Bowers, Adam Figman, Habeeba Husain, Ryan Jones, Melissa Medvedich, Marcel Mutoni, Ryne Nelson, Susan Price, Abe Schwadron and all of SLAM's readers/followers for making this #NBAFinals our best-covered yet.....The League helped matters by making sure we had good seats and great access to everything we needed. Now

VAGUELY LITERARY

JR Smith, you are often described as the craziest person in the NBA, or the only sane man in a league gone crazy. There is one book that makes so much sense for you. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey is the classic novel about life inside of an insane asylum. It's unclear whether the main character is crazy or not, which is how the world seems to perceive you, Earl III. You know all about insane asylums from your days with Denver and the Knicks, perhaps even in China. Sure, you had your issues, and then you escaped to greener pastures...or have you?

In the novel, Randle McMurphy, a man with a "colorful" past like yourself, spending a little time in jail, doing silly things for fun, is brought to the asylum, where he meets other eccentrics. Chief Bromden, Billy Bibbit, Dale Harding, George Sorensen, each one of them damaged and loveable at the same time, like many of your Denver, NY and to some degree, New Orleans and Cleveland teammates.

Of course, there has to be an enemy, and that would be Nurse Ratched. She stands for order, suppression of the individual spirit and conformity. All of the things that you hate. Randle battles with her, like you battle with whichever coach, commissioner or rules try to keep you down. Perhaps in your time in the league, you have heard your teams described as "The inmates running the asylum." This is exactly what Randle McMurphy hopes for. Imagine a world where it's not LeBron or Carmelo who calls the shots in a battle to overthrow an unfeeling system, but you. As the novel progresses, Randle has good days and bad ones, but ultimately does the most damage to himself while inspiring others. Don't want to spoil the ending, it's a tough one, much like coming so close to the ring.



In the movie version, which also happens to be terrific, Laker superfan Jack Nicholson plays the role of McMurphy. If you're still looking for a team, the Lakers have a bit of an asylum flavor to them these days. It is well known that you like to go out and have a good time and then post the results of said good time on Instagram. The most JR move of all would be to make time for literature, they'll never see it coming, and you have the actual season for your latest adventures. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* can be read over the summer and serve as a template for whatever madness you have planned for us this season.—**SAM RUBENSTEIN**

Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures; Noah Graham/NBAE via Getty Images



UNDER REVIEW

MOVIE

Dirk Nowitzki is not your average NBA player—neither in terms of his playing style or in terms of a long list his accomplishments (currently, the Mavs' forward ranks seventh on the all-time NBA scorers list) and *Nowitzki: The Perfect Shot* is not your average sports documentary. But despite Dirk's success and fame in the US, nobody knew if a full-length feature film solely on basketball, even on arguably the greatest European ballplayer ever, could fill enough seats in the movie theaters of the soccer-crazy nation that is Germany. Add to the fact that Nowitzki himself is usually very adamant in keeping his private life camera-free and you can understand the risk that director Sebastian Dehnhardt took when he started work on the film even as he didn't have a commitment from his main protagonist. Ultimately, though, Dirk was on board—and the movie became a trailblazing success. Now *The Perfect Shot* is available to American viewers as well.

As simplistic as it sounds, *The Perfect Shot* is precisely what the documentary is all about. It portrays the unique relationship between a sports megastar who could not be more humble, and the coach who got him there with a most unusual working routine, Holger Geschwindner. In the words of former Mav Michael Finley, it's "the mad scientist and Frankenstein." The movie gives unique insights into Nowitzki's work ethic, his families both in the US as well as in Germany (Dirk's parents almost manage to steal the show) and it proves once again that the road to success rarely runs in a straight line. *Nowitzki* is a well-rounded documentary not only for Mavs fans but every sports fan on either side of the pond.—**CHRISTIAN TROJAN**

Line of the Month

BY SHANNON BOOHER

LYRICS OF THE MONTH: **"Clyde Frazier with the hand skills/ Double rings baby, double up," "Luxury"; "And we just wanted a shot or two, Melo on the follow through," "Money Makes Us Happy"; Ever the loyal fan, Skyzoo is sticking with his Knicks, as evidenced by his lyrics on *Music For My Friends*. Let the countdown begin for a Kristaps Porzingis reference from Sky.** ***THAT YAY AREA OF THE MONTH:*** **The Pelicans taking a Playoff game from the Warriors? Nope. MC Hammer on an official Championship parade float? Yup. The Grizz out-shoot the Splash? Nope. Too $hort the most OG fan since Jack Nicholson? Yup. Mistah F.A.B. missing a home Warriors game? Nope. James Harden and the Rockets cursed by The Based God? Yup. LeBron take the Finals MVP from Iguodala? Nope. E-40 dropping albums like Steph Curry hits threes? Yup. Another local hip-hop scene repping a Championship team like this? Nope. Golden State Warriors, 2015 NBA champs? Yup.**



we just need a vote for Finals MVP (not to mention all the regular-season awards! Remember, Lang doesn't work here anymore).....And even if the haters don't give us those MVP votes, we've got an in-office MVP board that is a million times cooler anyway.....Speaking of Jordan Clarkson, we've got some big plans for him.....Of course the Confederate flag has no place in SEC arenas and stadiums. Coach Cal is stating the obvious!.....Who but Carmelo would have news linking him to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and a new soccer club in the same month?..... So, Phil, um, how's it goink?.....

TRUE TO THE GAME

Sike!

From small town to big city, **Otto Porter's** passion for the game of basketball can be traced to his close-knit and gigantic family.

Otto Porter took a big leap during the 2015 Playoffs, averaging 10 points and 8 rebounds a game for the Washington Wizards. The former third overall pick in 2013 had a rather unique path to the NBA—one that started in the very small town of Sikeston in Southeast Missouri. In fact, there were only 32 students in Otto's high school class. But that didn't matter—not to the Porters, anyway. As a family, they put Sikeston on the map.

SLAM: *Tell me a little bit about your hometown and how that influenced your development as a player.*

OP: I don't know where to start. I'm from a small area in Southeast Missouri, born and raised there. But I guess the thing about it is I have a big family on both sides—on my mom's side and my dad's side. They both had 13 brothers and sisters to be exact. And I guess my dad and his brothers just developed a thing for playing basketball. You know, my grandfather and my grandmother never played the game, so I guess it was just something for [my father and my uncles] to get into. And they kind of fell in love with the game and they played it all the time and it just became a family thing. And so I was born into that world, with both sides playing basketball, living in the same small area, going to the same high school.

SLAM: *Can you recall when exactly you fell in love with basketball?*

OP: I think it was when I got a little bit older. Of course, when I was younger I didn't really pick up basketball that fast, I guess. I was more into soccer at the time. But once I got older and I started playing with some of my family members, some of my cousins, that's when I really started to fall in love with the game. You know, at family get-togethers and stuff like that, just playing with my whole family in general—those were the best times that I had and that's when I really fell in love with the game.

SLAM: *Did you have any favorite courts growing up?*

OP: Yeah, just one court at my grandmother's house that we put together on the hill—that became our home court. I would ride my bike to [her] house just to practice on the court from 8 o'clock in the morning to like 9 at night. We'd be out there all day.

SLAM: *Was there a specific player that you looked up to as a kid?*

OP: There was one person—it was my dad. I grew up watching him playing in like rec leagues and little minor leagues with older guys, and just by watching him play I wanted to be like him.

SLAM: *Were you really good early on or did it take a while for you to develop?*

OP: I wouldn't say early on but you know, I was always playing competition that was two, three years older than me and so when I played with guys my age, I was dominating because I always played up—always played against bigger, better guys than me. But I guess I started to really come into my own when I got into high school.

SLAM: *Do you remember your first basketball?*

OP: Man, long ago. I think actually my mom was the first person to put a basketball in my hands. Yeah, it came from my mom.—**ALEX SQUADRON**

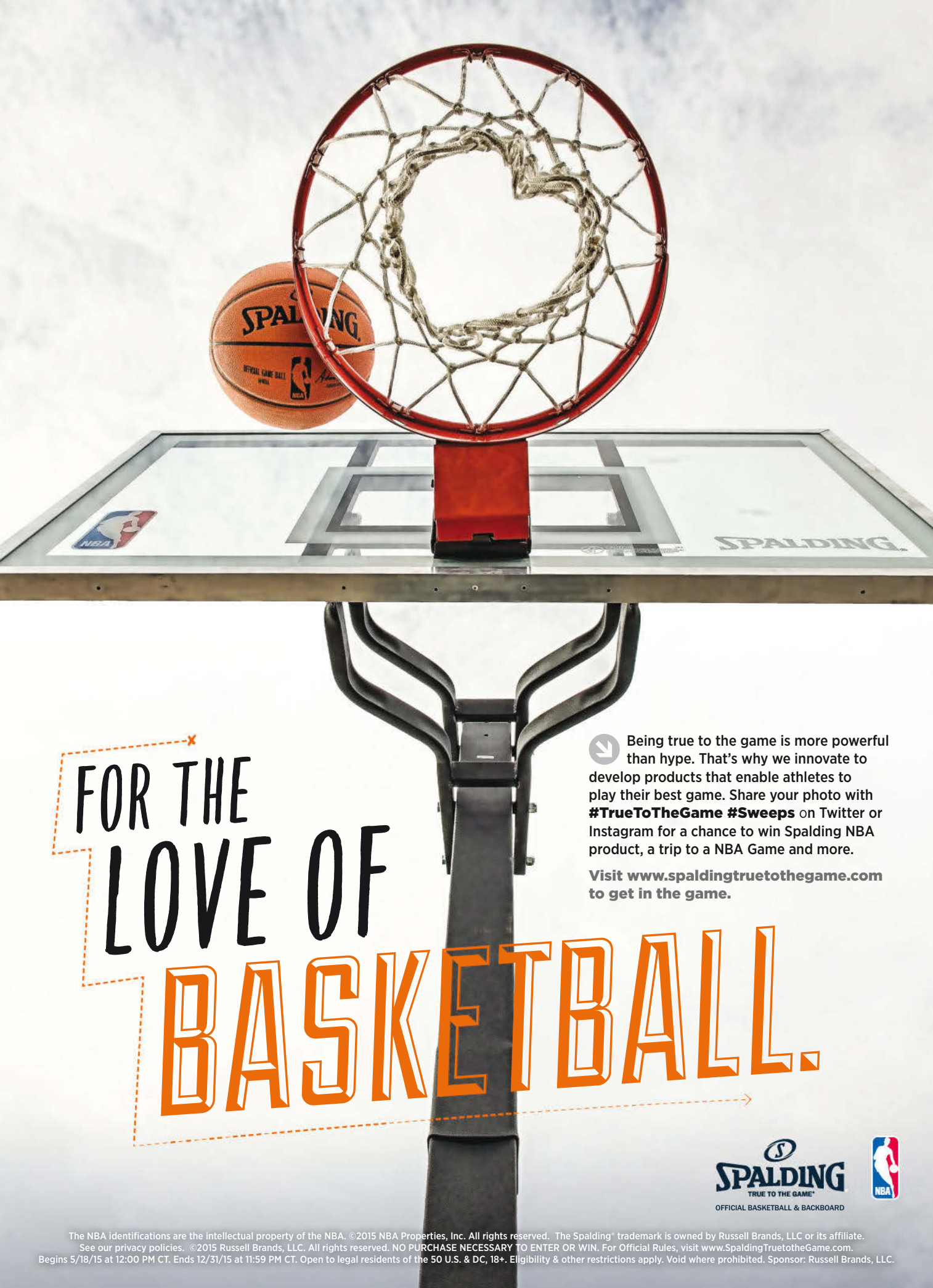
Share your photo with #TrueToTheGame #Sweeps on Twitter and Instagram for a chance to win Spalding NBA product, exciting trips and more. Visit spaldingtruetothegame.com to get in the game.



Ned Dishman/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

This seems like as good a place as any to thank Spalding for the tremendous role the company that makes the NBA's official ball played at our Draft Suite this year. Thanks y'all!.....We just traded for Luke Ridnour.....The sleeping on Cliff Alexander before, during and after the Draft was ABSURD.....We know his pro career is just getting started, but Big Jah should already know much better than to mess with that.....What exactly is the Blazers game plan this summer?..... Honestly, paying 10 cents for that "thing" is too much.....



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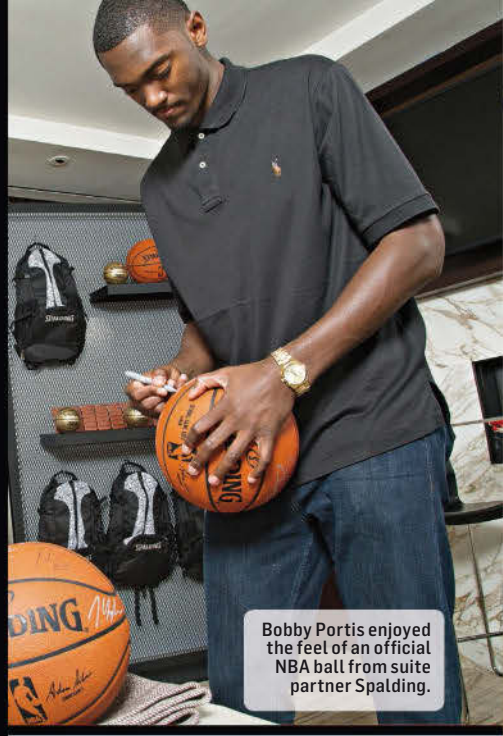


Trey Lyles copped a sick pair of one-of-one socks from our friends at Stance.

2015 DRAFT SUITE

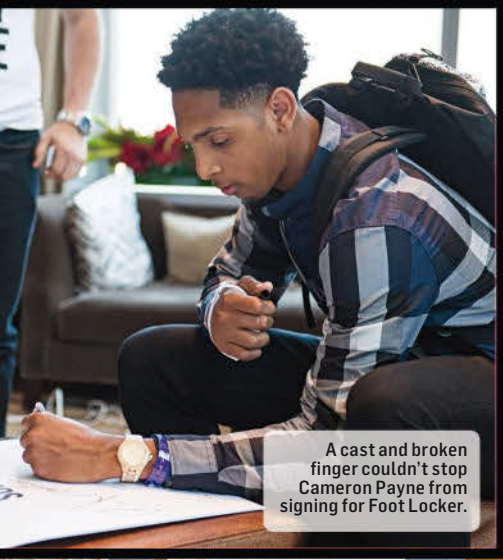
SPALDING STANCE

FOOT LOCKER X SLAM
+ SPALDING & STANCE TEAM UP FOR THE 2015 DRAFT SUITE



Bobby Portis enjoyed the feel of an official NBA ball from suite partner Spalding.

SLAM and Foot Locker teamed up for the fourth year in a row to host the 2015 Draft Suite, once again giving NBA Draftees a respite from the prying international media and a chance to relax away from the busy city streets. Rising 36 stories over NYC, The Penthouse Suite at the Intercontinental Times Square Hotel was, as always, a must-stop for the guys before the biggest night of their lives. Spalding took up residence on the second floor, and in addition to giving the guys a backpack and more, let them get their first taste of their future lives when they'll be autographing official NBA balls for fans. Stance, of course, was back to lace everyone with the freshest socks, including special one-of-one makeups. Rounding out the goodies was a gift card from Foot Locker and some exclusive slides from our friends at ISlide. Everyone from Karl-Anthony Towns and Emmanuel Mudiay to Kristaps Porzingis and Myles Turner came through and gave great interviews. In case you didn't catch them, head to the FL X SLAM Draft Suite 2015 Playlist on Foot Locker's YouTube channel now.



A cast and broken finger couldn't stop Cameron Payne from signing for Foot Locker.



The good folks at ISlide made custom slides for Jahlil Okafor, Dakari Johnson and more.



West met East when Cali's Stanley Johnson paid respects to Pee Wee Kirkland Jr and Sr.



Commercial star Emmanuel Mudiay chatted with SLAM's Abe Schwadron.

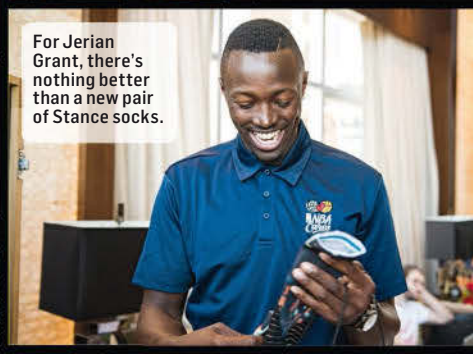


Top-pick-to-be Karl-Anthony Towns and his big smile sat down for an interview.

Andrew Link, Ashley Sears



Nattily clad Justise Winslow came through the Suite 48 hours before he got picked.



For Jerian Grant, there's nothing better than a new pair of Stance socks.



Gentle—and historic—giant Satnam Singh gave the day's most heartfelt interview.



Devin Booker proved that he and his sweet shot are always #TrueToTheGame.



Kevon Looney proudly showed off the "In Your Face" we did on him in SLAM 190.



Since he left Wisconsin, Sam Dekker has had time to read something truly important.



Myles Turner talked T-Swizzle's Twitter account and more in his FL x SLAM interview.



Kristaps Porzingis got the lowdown on Stance's latest from our man Tzvi Twersky.

IN YOUR FACE

LUCKY LEFTY

ODYSSEY SIMS

Tulsa Shock, 5-8, G

Odyssey Sims has been part of many dynamic duos, winning the 2012 NCAA title alongside Brittney Griner at Baylor and now in the WNBA with Skylar Diggins on the Tulsa Shock.

While she's played the role of Robin without complaint, the 23-year-old PG has star potential of her own. Sims' offensive and defensive talent make Sims' potential limitless. Ask her, and it's simple: "I just play with a fierce, competitive attitude."

Consider "O's" history of getting buckets. There was the time in seventh grade when she dropped 58, wearing the No. 3 in homage of Allen Iverson. Or in her sophomore season at Irving (TX) MacArthur, when she averaged 5 steals per game (up from 4.1 her freshman year).

Fast-forward to her senior season at Baylor in 2013-14. Sims hung 48 points, 10 rebounds and 7 assists against a solid West Virginia team en route to averaging 28.5 ppg and leading the Lady Bears to the Elite Eight.

There were some growing pains early in her rookie WNBA season in 2014. "I had to learn the game, understand plays, personnel," O says. "But in the second half, I picked it up."

Indeed, Sims dropped 39 points on 15-20 shooting against San Antonio and finished second in ROY voting. More important than her scoring, though, Sims allowed Diggins, a 24-year-old who plays with a similarly aggressive game, to play more of her natural 2-guard role. "Immediately, we were on the same page," Sims says.

Sims' 2015 season got off to a rocky start—she sustained a left knee injury three games into the year—but the Shock boasted a W-best 8-2 record as SLAM went to press. Sims hopes to be back soon.

With Diggins rehabbing a torn ACL, Sims currently has a chance to lead the team to the Playoffs for the first time since '09. "We can go far," O says. "We have to keep growing and learning, and we'll be fine."—**RYNE NELSON**



David Sherman/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

We read recently how the WNBA actually gets pretty good TV ratings in Las Vegas. SO WHY IS THERE NO TEAM THERE?! There's one that plays at Mohegan Sun in Connecticut, for God's sake. Not to mention the built-in audience of tourists in Vegas, all the comp tickets the casinos will give away, and Adam Silver's on-the-record acceptance of sports gambling. This seems like a complete no-brainer.....Then again, we thought we might see some WNBA promotion tied to the runaway ratings hit that



Kevin Coullau

PLANTING SEEDS

Spurs forward Boris Diaw explains the work he's doing to help educate and teach basketball to young players in Senegal.

As told to Peter Walsh

I traveled back to my father's homeland, Senegal, for the first time in a few years to visit my family and also to host a clinic at the SEED Academy. I've been working with SEED for years but realized that not much was being done for young women basketball players in Senegal, so I partnered with SEED to help launch the girls school. I'm really dedicated to helping the girls in the classroom and on the court and leading the clinic was an amazing experience.

It has been great being able to support the program and help run the women's academy. When I arrived, the girls were really happy to see me, and they were smiling a lot and wanted to show that they can do great things on the court and in the classroom. It was a short clinic but we were able to go through a lot of drills and the older girls helped me coach, which was really cool. When we first practiced in the morning, the 16-year-old girls helped me to teach the 11-, 12- and 13-year-old girls how to dribble, pass and shoot. When we came back in the afternoon, we made the drills a little harder but the girls picked it up right away. It showed them that there is always room for improvement and you can add little things to each drill to get better. It was fun to see improvement that quickly.

During my visit to Senegal, I also went to visit my father's hometown of Mpal. He is now the mayor there, so I got a great reception when I came. I established the Babac'Ards foundation in Senegal a decade ago to help develop education, and I hadn't been back in three or four years—being able to see how much the town and the country had changed was amazing. Coming back as the mayor's son and an NBA Champion caused a lot of excitement and everyone was very happy to see me. The whole trip was really magical.

I captured my travels on Instagram (@diawboris) and on a physical camera. Earlier this year, I went on a safari trip and brought my camera with me and took photos of wildlife that were used for the July edition of *National Geographic For Kids*. Each offseason I try and get better with my camera—I have a really deep passion for photography and sharing my travels through pictures.

has been the Women's World Cup, and we've been thinking the WNBA should run a campaign with SLAM, so maybe we should just stop worrying about the W's (lack of) marketing plans.....In case you're wondering, everyone on the SLAM staff is "pursuing a max deal" as well.....Does Elsa from NBA Photos have a last name?.....Why does Reggie Miller still block us?.....George Karl is so washed..... Ros Gold-Onwunde was down with us before she blew up :).....Being the living embodiment of #wellactually is no fun....."Some fucking kids sent us some bullshit."—SLAMonline story meeting.....

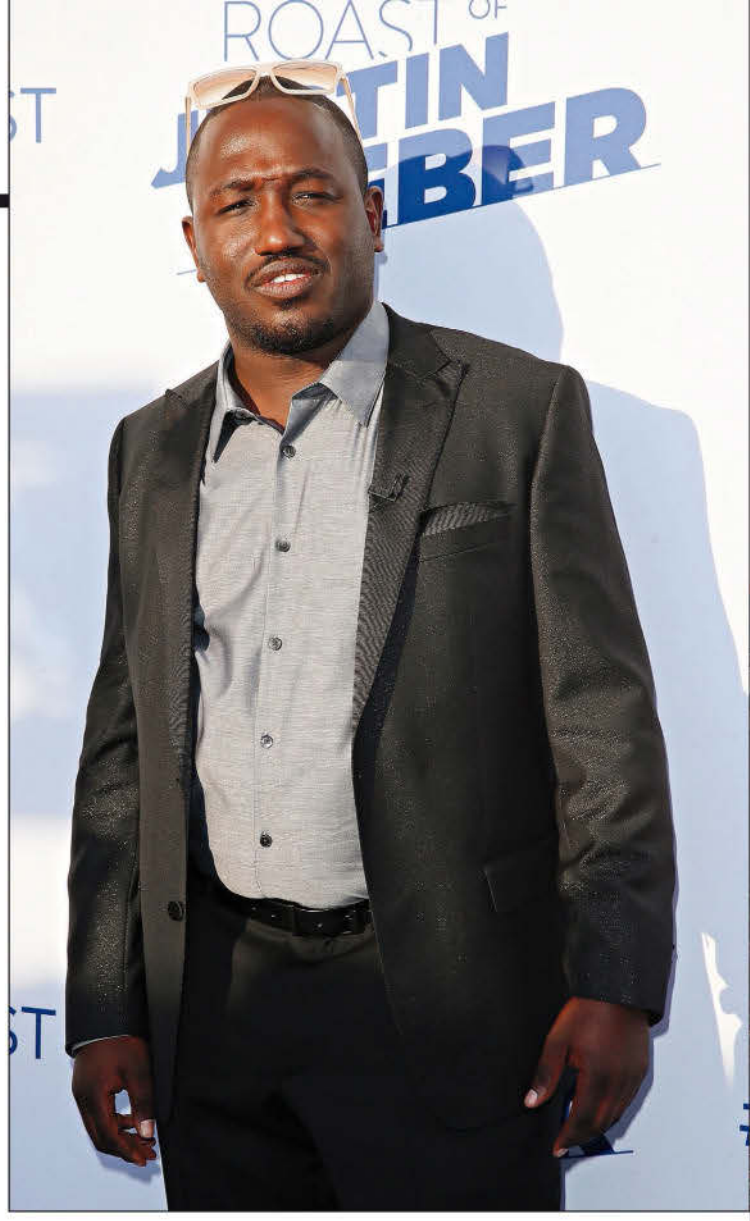
DIME DROP

WHY NOT?

We'd be happy to talk hoops with the great comedian **Hannibal Buress** any time.

Hannibal Buress has quite an impressive résumé, including stints on *Saturday Night Live, 30 Rock, Broad City, The Eric Andre Show* and several Comedy Central specials. This July, he's writing, executive producing and starring in his own weekly Comedy Central show entitled *Why? With Hannibal Buress.* Buress, born and raised in Chicago, is also a huge Bulls fan, so we had to catch up with him to pick his brain about the NBA.

SLAM: *Did you play basketball growing up?*
HB: I played in grade school, but that was pretty much my career outside of a few pickup games. I wasn't that good and kind of just stopped playing. My career high was 4 points—that was in fifth or sixth grade. But two of the four points did come on a shot that was from pretty deep.
SLAM: *You're from Chicago, so you must have lots of Michael Jordan memories. What's your favorite MJ moment?*
HB: The Jordan shrug was pretty cool. I remember watching that one at home. The shot over Bryon Russell, that was pretty dope. The double nickel at the Garden.
SLAM: *Where do you stand on all these Jordan versus LeBron debates?*
HB: LeBron is great, man. But you have to let his career play all the way out before you can compare them. They're different types of players. I hear the arguments from both sides. But you're asking a Chicago guy, so I think you know what a Chicago guy is going to say.
SLAM: *And of course, now Jordan is just a crying meme online.*
HB: That's what the internet is now. It's people taking one joke and stomping that into the ground, over and over again. But I think he'll be alright. He can handle it.
SLAM: *Are there any rules you would like the NBA to change or get rid of?*
HB: The intentionally fouling rule. I don't like it. I was at one of the games when the Rockets started hacking DeAndre Jordan in the first quarter. I was like, Come on, dude—we paid money to be here, man. It's rough. But I mean, it's a rule that only applies to a handful of players. Another thing: Nobody shoots underhand free throws. Like, you wouldn't change it up to potentially average 5 or 6 more points per game?
SLAM: *The resistance to underhand shooting is probably a pride thing.*
HB: But how prideful is slinging bricks all day, over and over? Underhand is the way to go. I would recommend these free-throw shooters be locked in a gym with Rick Barry for two months.
SLAM: *If you could have anyone from the NBA on your new show, who would you invite?*
HB: Mark Cuban's a smart dude. He'd be fun to have on TV. LeBron would be good, despite me being from Chicago and not liking what he's done to my team. He's a solid actor, man. Blake Griffin. Nate Robinson. JR Smith. And maybe get together all the NBA players who rap and have the first NBA cypher. Somebody's probably going to steal this idea, but so what, I'll come up with more. Get Iman Shumpert, Stephen Jackson, Kevin Durant, Damian Lillard, Tony Parker and get Kobe back on that rap shit, too.
—ALEX WONG



Mark Davis/Getty Images; Colorado Mesa Athletics; Brian Ballweg

PICTURE ME BALLIN'



Ryan Stephan, Colorado Mesa University: Answer: He ranked fourth overall in points per game in DII and helped lead his team to its most wins in five seasons. "Who is Ryan Stephan?" Correct! If College Basketball Players is ever a category on *Jeopardy*, y'all can take charge of the game—much like Stephan did in his junior year at Colorado Mesa. He led his Mavericks with 25.3 points and 8.5 rebounds, recorded 10 double-doubles and put up a career-high 40 points against No. 2 ranked UCCS. The best part? He still has his senior year to make his potential *Jeopardy* description even better.

Madison Rowland, Queens College: Madison Rowland's sophomore season at Queens College in New York boasts quite a list of accomplishments. At 20.9 points per game, she ranks 10th in scoring in the NCAA's DII. Pair that with her 9.9 rebounds per game and she's as close to a double-double average as you can get. She dishes out assists often enough, too, averaging 4.1. Back in January, she had her best game of the season with 35 points, 9 boards, 4 assists and 7 steals. It's no wonder her consistent numbers earned her the conference Player of the Year award, First-Team honors, and a spot right here on this page. Well deserved, Rowland!**—HABEEBA HUSAIN**



NOYZ

This^^^^^ should have been a LOT easier to make happen, but we're glad it finally did.....In case you were wondering, #suegetsrobbed was the bomb. #SLAMFam knows how to celebrate!.....Does OVO Schneezy actually read this magazine, or does he just look at the pictures? There's just one way to find out.....Not that they need much love or promotion but the "LeBrons" role in the True Detective *season two opener was pretty classic.....Huge shouts to Foot Locker and Under Armour for making us a*





Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images, Courtesy of the Mozgov Family

RUSHIN' TO THE TOP

Timofey Mozgov's unlikely route to the NBA began in a Russian elementary school.

Five seasons in, Timofey Mozgov is fresh off a breakout tilt with the Eastern Conference Champion Cleveland Cavaliers. On the day the Cavs picked up his team option extension and just a handful of hours before catching a plane back to his native Russia, the center stopped by our Draft Suite to talk about how his upbringing in St. Petersburg led him to this point.

SLAM: *How does a kid from St. Petersburg end up choosing basketball?*
TM: The first time I picked up a ball, I was, like, 9. How it happened is funny and long. Do you have enough pages?
SLAM: *We'll make it fit, bro.*
TM: Good. So I was in fourth grade. Just to let you understand, sports works a bit different in Russia. Like, in the US, every school has a team. Over there, schools don't have teams, but they have special schools. So I was in fourth grade in the middle of the class and some ladies come in and ask, "Uh guys, you have some tall dudes?" I was taller than everybody but shy, so I stayed quiet. But then my friends and everybody was like, "This dude is tall! This dude here!" And the lady said, "Can we get you for a second?" I said OK, so I go out and she asked me to jump, sprint and whatever. I do all this stuff and then she says, "You know what? We got a basketball school and we want you to join." They took my number and I forgot about it. Two weeks later, my dad says, "Why didn't you tell me they wanted you to play basketball?" I said I just forgot. He said, OK, pick up your shoes, we go to this school. That was the first time I picked up a ball. Funny, right?
SLAM: *Indeed. How long until you decided you wanted to play seriously?*
TM: When I was like 20. I wasn't a good player. Even for a Russian, they say. I said, This is the time, if I don't go forward now and at least be good for the national team [then] there's no way I'm going to be a good basketball player and make a good life, or whatever you call it. For me, it was like, Now, if you don't go forward, you're going to [have] a hard time because you have no degree and you're not a good player. So you have to do something. Then we got a new coach and he let me play a lot of minutes. Then I went to the national team, then the NBA scouts probably saw me in the European championships.
SLAM: *What was your first sport?*
TM: Everybody plays soccer overseas, in Europe. Soccer is big, and it's easy. All you need is a ball. After school, you can just put two bag packs and play.
SLAM: *What position did you play?*
TM: Oh, I don't know because I was worse. You know, I still can't even catch the ball. [Laughs] I'm working on it though, trust me guys.
SLAM: *We read somewhere that you used to play basketball in the snow.*
TM: It's true. Me and my guys would mix American football and basketball together. We would run though the snow and push each other and shoot. No dribbling. It was so fun, just push each other in the snow and score.
SLAM: *What's been the biggest adjustment coming from Russia?*
TM: Here, people do business first and sometimes they end up [having] a good relationship, but everyone understands it is business. The problem for Russians, I think, people understand it is business but not everybody. Somebody will keep trusting in a relationship but when time to split money comes, they don't understand. "Now you say this, you said that!" Here, they know business and they know [what's] friends and good relationships. Here it's OK, there [it's like] you are betrayed.
SLAM: *So, we gotta ask, any potential vodka endorsements in Russia after the hilarious Brew Garden spot?*
TM: Not yet. But you gotta understand that was my first commercial! By the way, I think it worked because it went everywhere. But now I have experience. People [back home] were like, "What the [*pauses*] was that?" It was my first time—don't be so mean, you know?—**FRANKLYN CALLE**

part of the great Emmanuel Mudiay/Draft campaign. The number of calls/texts we got from people who saw the ad are pretty good proof (as if we needed it) of how well a good ad can resonate.....Speaking of FL, our friend Matt Schade really left?! Congrats and good luck, dude!.....If we ever get good internet service, watch out! (And that means both in office and absurdly slow arenas like Barclays).....Do you, Habeeba!.....We made it fit, bro!.....To say that Basketball-Reference.com is 20 times more useful than NBA.com for actual stats might be understating the discrepancy.....

STREETBALL

BALLER PARTY

Ball Up is putting its stamp on the summer hoops scene this year more than ever before. With over 200 games scheduled under its umbrella, including runs in 10 major markets from NYC to L.A., Ball Up is turning summertime basketball into a nationwide event. Not only is Ball Up continuing its now-famous yearly Search For The Next Tour but the inaugural Ball Up Million Dollar Summer Challenge is also in full swing, which will crown one squad the best summer streetball crew in America, with a milli in cash at stake.

The Ball Up MDSC is already underway in New York, L.A., Chicago, Indianapolis, Washington, DC and Philly—each city was selected for its unique basketball history and culture. By summer's end, the champs from each local market will go at it for all the marbles, and only one city will lay claim to the title of best summer hoops squad in the country. Not only that, but Ball Up is handing out cash to MVPs, scoring leaders, DPOYs and the winners of the local slam dunk and three-point contests in every market. More than 50 players will get paid this summer.

And, like every summer for the past five years, the Ball Up All-Stars are traveling the country to look for the best undiscovered talent in each city. Streetball legends The Professor, Bone Collector, AO, Sik Wit It, Air Up There and others are coming to your city as part of the 2015 Search For The Next Tour. You know how it works: Ball out, and you get on the bus. Ball Up CEO Demetrius Spencer calls it "basketball in its purest form."

The 10 best from each city's open run will face The Professor and Co. on the main stage and be coached by NBA guest coaches. Past NBA guest coaches have included James Harden, Joakim Noah, Kyle Lowry, Derek Fisher, Gilbert Arenas, Julius Erving, and Dennis Rodman. The two hometown MVPs at each stop make it to the final showdown in L.A., where Ball Up bestows the top performer with a $100K contract and a spot on the Ball Up All-Stars.

Catch the MDSC Playoffs and the Championship game of the Search for the Next Tour the weekend of July 31. A series documenting the Summer Challenge is premiering on ESPN2, September 16 at 8:00 EST.—**ABE SCHWADRON**



Courtesy of Ball Up

NOYZ

*Bo Ryan blah blah blah blah blah zzzzzzzzzzz. All we really have to say about him is: Diamond Stone.....Brook Lopez and Thaddeus Young are absolutely guaranteed to deliver the Nets, um, slightly above average stats, 38-43 wins and zero excitement. So, like, the entire Brooklyn era thus far, pretty much.....Khris Middleton came *up*..... They're taking a slow route but we still say the Celtics will be the best team in the L in 2018..... The best part of Woj's work is when he keeps a sense of humor about things.....*

LA NYC CHI



Indy DC Philly

BallUpMDSC.com

LOUDER THAN A BOMB Always by Dave Zirin

VOICES OF REASON

NBA players can make an immeasurable difference by joining the Black Lives Matter campaign.



Streeter Lecka/Getty Images

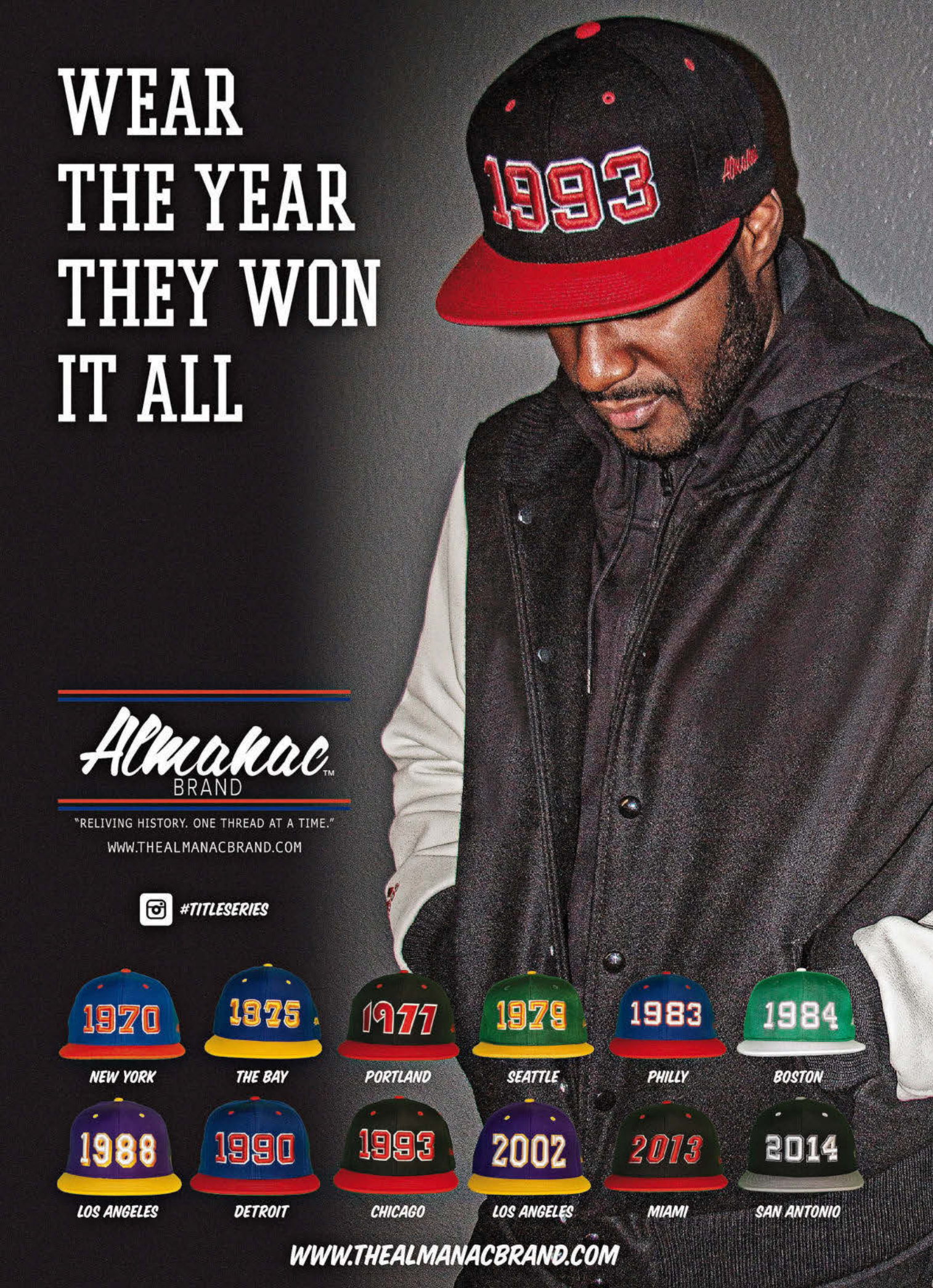
Over the last year I have done a radio program in Washington, DC, with former NBA player Etan Thomas. Thomas played 11 years in the NBA, so suffice it to say he has an extensive Rolodex of former players for us to get on the phone and interview. Etan is a thoughtful, politically minded person, and the friends he made in the League over the years are very similar in their approach to both the game and the world. We have been able to interview people like Larry Hughes, Bryon Russell, John Wallace, Nolan Smith, Roger Mason, Antonio Daniels and Joe Smith—very good people with a lot to say.

Of course, we have been doing the show in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement against police violence, a movement that Etan Thomas has heavily invested himself in. This has meant that we have asked many of these former players if they themselves ever had run-ins with the police or had problems with local authorities. I certainly expected some of them to have stories. After all, these are wealthy black men driving fancy cars, which is racial profiling catnip for police officers trained to target in such a manner. There was a great deal, however, that I did not expect to hear. I did not expect to hear the pain in people's voices, as these confident alpha males expressed a guarded torment over going through the ordeal of being treated like a criminal. I also did not expect to hear how close many of these situations came to ending horribly wrong. We are talking about Durham police having guns drawn as the window comes down, the barrel pointed right between the eyes of guard Nolan Smith. This is referred to as protocol. I also did not expect to hear from Nolan Smith that Mike Krzyzewski was one of the first people he told and was given a great deal of love from Coach K and his entire family.

One commonality in all of the stories we have heard was how the attitude of the police would change dramatically once they either recognized the man behind the wheel or looked at their licenses and made the connection that this was not just a random 7-foot-tall man in the front seat of a custom made Denali. On one level, their fame allowed them to travel from being anonymously black—a threat, a predator, someone to approach armed with the finger on the trigger—to being an actual human being. But on another level, the realization that they were dealing with an NBA player at times made the situation more precarious. The attitude by police could careen as fast as an eye-blink from "you are a threat" to "you are a star" to "you better not act like you're better than me just because you're a star." Ask Thabo Sefolosha, Dale Davis or Chris Webber how quickly a run-in with police can turn violent once they figure out that you are not only an NBA player but an NBA player with "attitude."

One profound benefit that takes place when NBA players speak out and stand with the Black Lives Matter movement is that it puts a recognizable face on the question of police violence for white Americans. We still live in a deeply segregated country where many see black Americans as an indistinguishable mass—unless they have fame in sports, music or, increasingly, politics—not unlike the way those police officers approached Nolan Smith's car window in Durham. To speak out, to tell their stories and to tell the truth—that fame, money and glory can only protect you so much—has the power to sever segregation and create a transmission belt of information and understanding. Their stories may not fit with a corporate narrative or the NBA's desire to leap toward even more mainstream success, but the social good that arises from their seizing the microphone should cause us to encourage them to open their mouths and be heard. The stakes are higher than brand potential. They speak to whether we can ever move on from the racial hatreds of the past and build a better country.

NOYZ *We couldn't have said it better than Adam Silver: "There has never been an NBA without Harvey Pollack, who has been part of the NBA family since he was tracking statistics for the Philadelphia Warriors during the League's inaugural season. He documented NBA history for nearly 70 years with passion, curiosity and a relentless work ethic. Harvey has been a true caretaker and ambassador of the game, and he will be sorely missed."…..James Forni…..Bobby Heyward…..Jamie Sangouthai…..Jeremiah Tate…..Jackson Vroman…..*


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KICKS ON COURT



Clockwise from left:
Nike Kobe X Elite Out now, $225
Reebok Shaq Attacked July 31, $115
Under Armour Clutchfit Drive Out now, $125
AND1 Havok August 15, $100
Jordan Melo M11 Out now, $160
adidas Crazylight Boost 2015 Andrew Wiggins Home makeup; Out now, $140



OFFICE WORK

When you're on the SLAM Team, bball shoes are mandatory.

Image **Jeff Harris**



Joe Murphy/NBAE via Getty Images



SLAM ADAMONTH

6.14.15
ORACLE ARENA
Oakland, CA

HARRISON BARNES
ON THE CAVALIERS

History will view the 2015 NBA Finals as the Finals that nearly did away with centers, as Andrew Bogut went from playing 28 minutes in Game 1 to consecutive DNP-CDs in Games 5 and 6. Evolutionary basketball. But history will not be telling the entire truth. Cavs counterpart Timofey Mozgov averaged 32 minutes over the course of the series—a number that would have been higher were it not for his nine-minute appearance in Game 5 when David Blatt tried to match Steve Kerr's small-ball. The Cavs lost the game and two nights later, the series.

It wasn't Moz' fault. If anything, there's a chance they don't make the Finals at all without him. He was a pick-and-roll savant on offense and a massive roadblock on defense. Facing Draymond Green, Mozgov made stop after stop after stop.

But the law of averages said someone would get through. It happened to be Harrison Barnes, who delivered one of his only 11 two-pointers over both a late-arriving Mozgov and a shouldn't-have-even-bothered-arriving Mike Miller. Too bad Blatt didn't give Moz the whole night off after all.—**RUSS BENGTSON**



How did Jimmy Butler evolve from under-the-radar rookie to NBA SUPERSTAR? Some seriously HARD WORK - and the CONFIDENCE that came from it.

I Pledge Allegiance to the GRIND

by Chris Cason

Confidence in one's self is essentially the biggest asset a successful athlete can have.

And that power of self-belief is the exact reason that by the time you're reading this, the ink of Jimmy Butler's signature will be dry and affixed to a new, huge contract.

From an early age, the Tomball, TX, native learned to trust and rely on himself due in large part to spending some of his teenage years without a place to call home. Those experiences from those tough times, along with a Texas-sized work ethic, became pillars of his character. Those pillars are why it wasn't that difficult for him to turn down an estimated four-year, $44 million offer from the Chicago Bulls prior to the beginning of the regular season.

"He had a number in his head," Steve McCaskill, Butler's co-agent at Relativity Sports, tells SLAM, explaining Butler's thought process during last October's negotiations. "Ultimately, if they would have offered that number, I'm not sure Jimmy would have signed it, because I think he wanted to play it out. Jimmy's a guy that likes having a chip on his shoulder."

Essentially, Butler wanted to prove to himself and to his teammates what kind of player he felt he could become. Former Bulls' coach Tom Thibodeau—already a firm believer in Butler's defense and competitiveness—knew that the work Butler put in before training camp began would translate, so he installed new plays designed to give him more room to flourish and expand his game on the offensive end.

No one could foresee Butler leading the Bulls in scoring, his first All-Star berth and



Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images



Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images

"I THINK BUILDING CONFIDENCE WAS MY MAIN THING. I PUT UP A LOT OF JUMP SHOTS AND WORKED ON MY BALLHANDLING, BUT THIS GAME IS 99.9 PERCENT CONFIDENCE."

the NBA's Most Improved Player award—which he essentially wrapped up in December. Combined with his second straight All-Defensive Second-Team selection, Butler will openly admit that he didn't play his best defense this year with all of the new added offensive responsibilities bestowed upon him.

"I'm not surprised he's improved," Thibodeau said during the season. "But the amount he's improved? I wouldn't be honest if I said I saw that coming."

Even after digesting this past season's accomplishments—20.8 ppg, 5.8 rpg, 3.3 apg in 38.7 mpg and upping those numbers during the Bulls' Playoff run—it's still hard to believe that a player selected 30th overall in the 2011 Draft could make such a drastic leap so quickly, and in only his second season as a full-time starter.

"Since the moment he arrived [in Chicago], he was always a hard worker," recalls former Bulls teammate and current Miami Heat forward Luol Deng. "He was always coming in early for extra work," Deng continues. "We knew he was a great defender, but he really worked on his offense to get to where he is now."

As recently as the '13-14 season, the scouting report on Butler focused mainly on him playing the passing lanes and crashing the offensive glass. On offense, defenses often played off him, as he struggled through a turf toe injury throughout most of last season while shooting just 39.7 percent from the field and only 28.3 from three.

Those percentages and his overall production skyrocketed this season to 46.2 percent from the field and 37.8 percent from three on 14 FGA per game, third-most on the Bulls behind Derrick Rose and Pau Gasol. For the first time in his pro career, Butler had to deal with defenses double-teaming him in hopes of preventing him from abusing smaller guards in the low post.

Let's just say the scouting report on him is a bit more extensive now, to say the least.

"His confidence," Rose says when we asked what his backcourt mate's biggest adjustment was this season. "It was just him going out there and translating what he had worked on and adding it to his game. He was huge."

The work that fueled that new confidence and the expanding of his game began as soon as the final buzzer sounded on the team's 2013-14 first-round exit to the Washington Wizards.

Butler didn't retreat to a tropical island for rest and recovery. Instead, he linked up with personal trainer Chris Johnson, who has trained other NBA players like Tobias Harris, Gerald Green and DJ Augustin.

Johnson had wanted to work

with Butler the previous summer but their schedules never aligned. This time around, the two would have all summer to train, and Johnson knew that with the physical tools, eagerness and willingness to learn, his new client could turn into an All-Star.

Johnson had long been an admirer of the footwork of Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant. He felt that with Butler's size, strength and athleticism, focusing on that facet of his game at 25 would not only give him an advantage, but would also help him play on different areas of the floor.

The training regimen would be thorough, consistent and constant.

"Jimmy and I started with two workouts a day," Johnson says. "We would do two-a-days all summer, working on his footwork, body balance, shooting and ballhandling. We had a strict routine that we put together that applied to on-court, NBA game type situations.

"Wherever he went, I was there. If we were out of state, we were still working out. Jimmy rarely took a day off. If we took a day off, that means we still worked out at least once that day. If Jimmy was on vacation we worked out twice, if not three times a day. I can recall us sometimes working out five times a day at Marquette."

As Butler's confidence grew, the results were immediate: Butler often dominated the open runs against Johnson's other pro and overseas clients.

"I think [building confidence] was my main thing," Butler says. "Yeah, I put up a lot of jump shots, worked on my ballhandling, but this game is 99.9 percent confidence. If you think you can do something, you can do it. My confidence is up now. Chris Johnson helped put that confidence in me. He did a lot for me."

"Jimmy just wants to win," says McCaskill. "If you outwork everyone, you're going to have a chance to win. Every time he worked out, we never talked about his contract. It was always about becoming a better player and helping the team win. Every time he was asked to do something, he did it, and he was prepared for this growth in his career. Obviously, I don't think anyone could predict he would be an All-Star this year, but when you have the talent and you put in the hard work, anything can happen."

Once the accolades and recognition began to come, no one was happier for Butler than the Bulls teammates that had watched him wait for his chance and then take full advantage to seize his opportunity.

"It's a great story all around," says teammate Kirk Hinrich. "The fact that Jimmy did it the hard way, earned his playing time and now he's got the respect of everyone in the League—I don't know where we would have been without Jimmy."

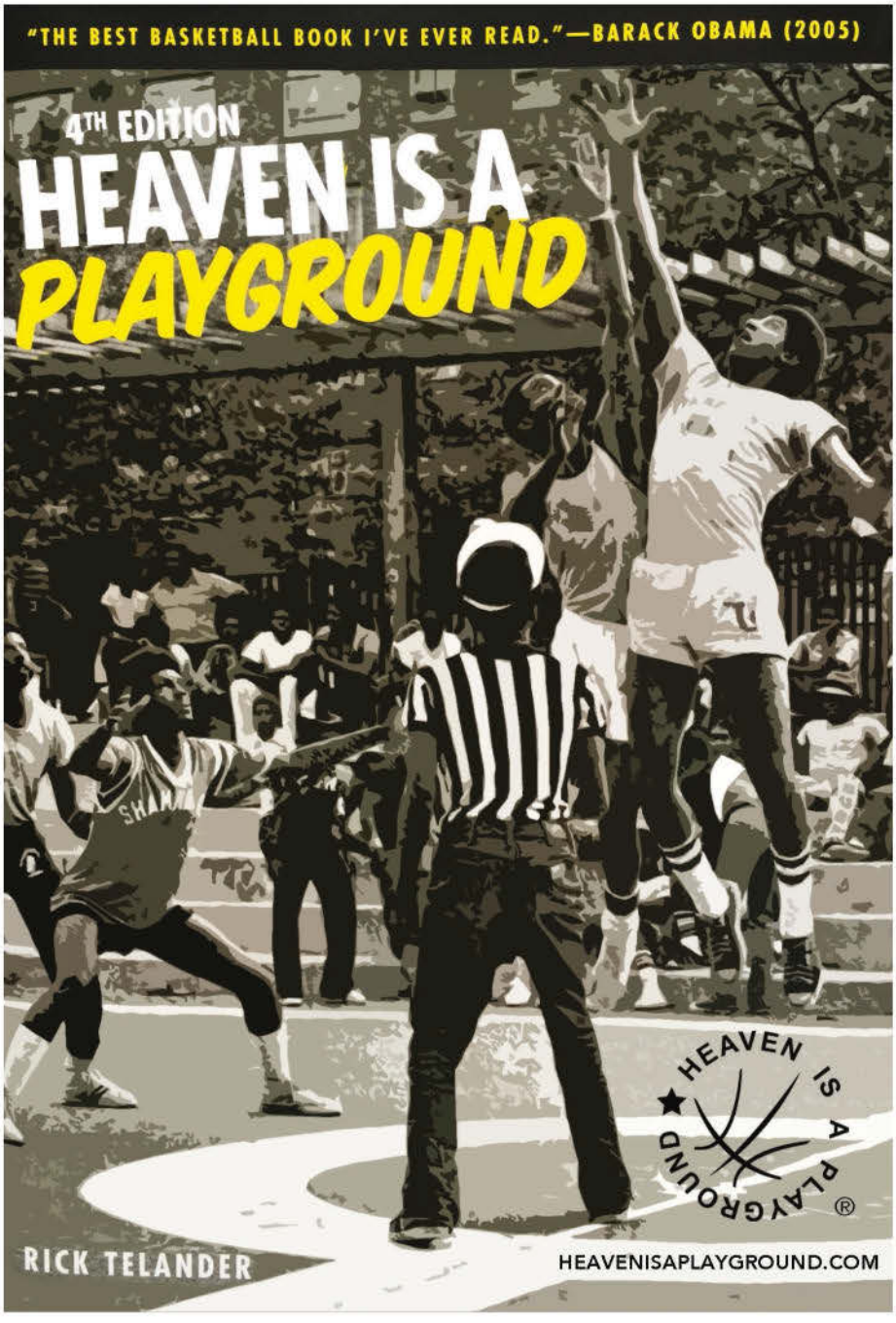
Even with Butler's emergence as an offensive focal point, the Bulls could never establish any true consistency, as injuries quelled the chemistry of the starting lineup. Then, with a disappointing second-round loss to an undermanned Cleveland Cavs squad, Thibodeau's firing and impending free agency, all eyes turned toward the coming offseason.

Besides his base in Chicago, Butler has already spent some of this offseason in Los Angeles and overseas on a promotional tour for the movie *Entourage* with his good friend Mark Wahlberg. While it's a definite change from last summer's intense grind, his commitment to the gym and improving his game has never waivered.

The Bulls have said they will be proactive with Butler's contract situation, and with his status as a restricted free agent, they can match all offers and keep him in Chicago.

At this point, he's proved his worth. The next goal is an obvious one.

"I want to win a Championship," Butler says. "That's the ultimate goal. The better the team does, the better everyone looks. Individual things come from team success and it's all about my teammates having the confidence in me. You're remembered in this League for winning Championships. That's what I'm working toward." $



STONE PROTECTOR

ON A TEAM THAT'S PROVEN TO TRADE JUST ABOUT ANYONE IN THE NAME OF TANKING, SIXERS' SHOT-BLOCKING MACHINE NERLENS NOEL ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS A PLAYER WORTH HOLDING ON TO. AND HE'S JUST GETTING STARTED.

BY ABE SCHWADRON

Nerlens Noel is 6-11. He has a flat top. He dresses like the Fresh Prince (word to West Philly), his teammates describe him as goofy and he's a budding star on the basketball court. So would you believe he was a meek, shy high schooler less than three years ago?

"Nerlens was always quiet. He would slowly move around campus and would sometimes struggle to keep to his schedule," says Marcus O'Neil, head coach at Tilton (NH) School, where the Everett, MA, native played his final two years of high school ball. "Then we would get into a highly tense and competitive situation, and he became a different person. We would be in a timeout and I would catch a glimpse of Nerlens' eyes and I could feel the competitive fire."

After hurriedly answering two or three questions from a pack of beat reporters in the visitors' locker room at Madison Square Garden following an April loss to the Knicks—a few days before his 21st birthday—Noel takes a few minutes to sit down with SLAM, and the fire is there.

"Year Two, I want to be an All-Star, clear as that," he says point-blank. "I want to work on every aspect of my game, I want to get stronger, just come back a lot more dominant."

After sitting out all of 2013-14 while recovering from a torn ACL, Noel averaged 9.9 points, 8.1 rebounds, 1.9 blocks, 1.8 steals and 1.7 assists per game in his rookie season, finishing third in Rookie of the Year voting (behind Minnesota's Andrew Wiggins and Chicago's Nikola Mirotic). After the All-Star break, in particular, Noel was phenomenal. In March, the kid put up 14.3 ppg, 11.2 rpg, 2.4 spg, 2.1 bpg and 1.8 apg—numbers no player, let alone a rookie, in League history has notched in any one month since Hakeem Olajuwon in December of 1994. That included a notably beastlike 30-point, 14-rebound performance against a formidable Clippers frontline.

"I thought about it the whole break," says Nerlens, who is uniquely looked at as a leader on the rebuilding Sixers despite having just finished his first season in the L, "about how I needed to assert myself and finish strong. I think that was my turning point."

Usually, there ain't much to celebrate from an 18-win season. But Noel's rapid development was diamond-in-the-rough stuff. In the words of Sixers head coach Brett Brown, Nerlens is "a complete game changer."

On offense, he's still a work in progress, having mostly relied on hustle points during his rookie season. "My game is different. I'm slender. I'll get stronger, but I like to use my quickness," says Nerlens, whose favorite player is still Kevin Garnett. "I definitely see myself bulking up and being able to be out on the perimeter and shoot that 15-footer with more consistency. That's going to be one of my main focuses going into this offseason."

But for Nerlens, it all starts on D, where he's already one of the NBA's premier shot blockers. No one is safe: James Harden and Russell Westbrook were among the victims of Noel's 142 rejections this season.

"If people get to the rim, he punches it. It's to the point now where, if someone gets to the cup, we know Nerlens is going to go get it," says Sixers guard Hollis Thompson. "Someone tries to dunk it, he's gon' block it. That's what we're used to. It's a lot of fun playing with him, because Coach says, 'Just go get it, I don't care if you get a foul, just go get it.' So he's trying to block everything."

Asked if he's ever had his shit swatted in practice, Thompson laughs. "He'll be on the wing, you'll go by him, think you've got a dunk, and he'll come behind and just beat it out of bounds. It's crazy. He's just crazy athletic and he's passionate about getting stops."

Veteran teammate Jason Richardson says the only comparison that comes to mind for a defensive anchor so effective and yet still so young is three-time Defensive Player of the Year Dwight Howard—with whom J-Rich played in Orlando from 2010 to 2012.

"Dwight came in so raw, came in as a defender, a rebounder, blocking shots," Richardson says. "I look at Nerlens like that—he has the ability to be what Dwight is now. I have no doubt in my mind that if Nerlens continues to grow, he'll be a Defensive Player of the Year in the next five years. No doubt in my mind."

Noel was the only player to finish in the top 10 in both steals and blocks in 2014-15. He posted a block rate of 5 percent and a steal rate of 2.9 percent—the only other full-time player in the NBA to match those statistics in both categories? Anthony Davis. Individually, Nerlens was top-10 in Defensive Rating, better than Davis. And despite Philadelphia's dead-last ranking in Offensive Rating last season, the Sixers were 13th in the NBA in Defensive Rating.

"To build a program, and grow a program, I think you have to do that through defense," says Brown. "Especially in the city of Philadelphia."

In Nerlens, the Sixers are doing just that. S



David Dow/NBAE via Getty Images



Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images; Jesse D. Garrabrant/NBAE via Getty Images; Garrett Elwood/NBAE via Getty Images; Garrett Elwood/NBAE via Getty Images



2015 NBA FINALS

THE WARRIORS' CODE

Despite the intense efforts of the best player in the world, the Golden State Warriors - led by the sick shooting of Stephen Curry and the defensive brilliance of Andre Iguodala- banded together to defeat the Cleveland Cavaliers in an entertaining, hard-fought 2015 NBA Finals.

2015 NBA FINALS





GAME 1

WARRIORS 108, CAVALIERS 100 (OT)

Oracle Arena, Oakland

"It was just a classic five minutes that we needed to get that win."

Those words are Stephen Curry's, and they're the only way to describe the difference between a Cavs' victory and the actual outcome of Game 1—a 108-100 Dubs win that came after 53 grueling minutes, the last five of which were dominated by the home team.

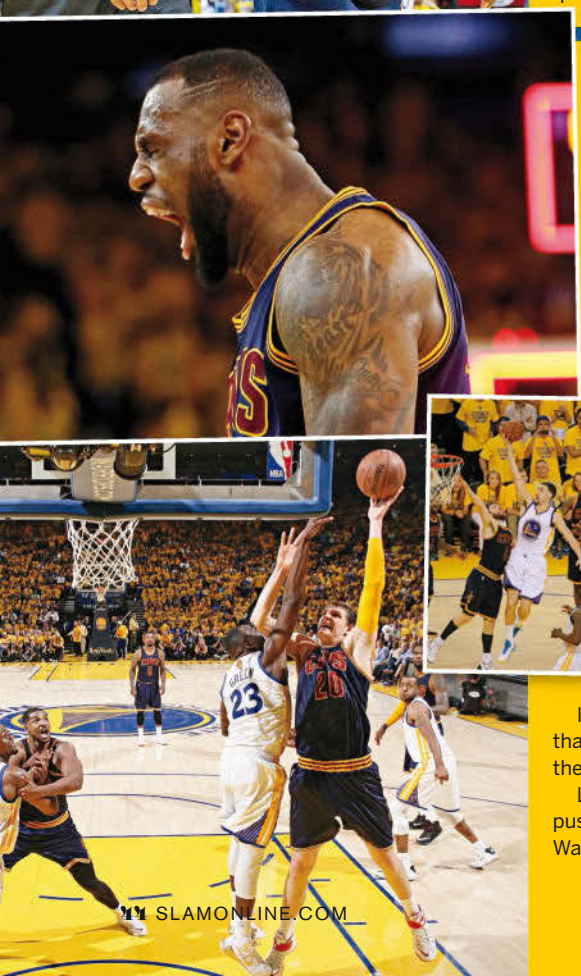
The Warriors clawed back to earn the OT session, fighting from down 14 early. The Cavs had their chances, though, namely a possession as the clock expired in the fourth quarter in which one single bucket could've sealed a win. But a LeBron James fadeaway from the elbow clanked off the side of the rim, and then an Iman Shumpert follow flew over it, and so we headed to OT, where the Warriors went into full regular-season mode.

Golden State put in a quick 7 points in OT—4 on Curry free throws to go with a Harrison Barnes corner three—and when the Cavs needed offense most, they received none of it. The ball never really moved on Cleveland's side of the court, with a couple quick passes almost always leading to contested jumpers—none of which went in. *None*. The Cavs scored just 2 points in the extra session, and even those shouldn't really count, as they came on a lay-up with 8.9 seconds remaining, the game more than decided by then.

"It's always a game of runs," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said afterward. "Our team, we like to play fast. We try to rely on our defense to get stops so we can get out and run. And there are going to be runs both ways, especially when you get to the Finals. You're going to be playing against a great team. So you just have to stay with it."

The Dubs certainly stayed with it. LeBron got his 44 (plus 8 boards and 6 assists), but the help just wasn't there, and to make matters worse, Kyrie Irving went down in OT with what we'd later learn was a fractured left knee that'd sideline him for the remainder of the Finals. But all that would be worried about later—on this night, the story was the fact that the Cavs were right there, and then the Warriors showed why they were very much the favorites before the series ever began.

"We put ourselves in a position to win," a disappointed LBJ said postgame. "We just didn't come through."**–ADAM FIGMAN**



GAME 2

CAVALIERS 95, WARRIORS 93 (OT)

Oracle Arena, Oakland

Despite leading for much of the game and blowing a couple of chances to win it outright, the Cavs were ultimately outmatched in the first contest of the series, losing because of Golden State's depth and preposterous shooting prowess. Now here they were in Game 2, expected to even up the series without a now-ruled-out Kyrie Irving? How, Sway?

They did, thanks to one man's performance: 39 points, 16 rebounds, 11 assists and 1 steal during a game that, seconds after ending, resulted in Cleveland's best player taking the ball, spiking it, then pounding his chest and roaring his voice into the electric Oracle Arena.

I mean, what's there to say about this guy that hasn't already been said by the kid in the *LeBrooon Jaaaaames* Vine?

LeBron and the Cavs played a slow and pushy form of basketball that countered the Warriors' run-and-gun style—and on this night, with Golden State's shots not falling (Klay Thompson was solid, 34 points but Stephen Curry was ice cold, finishing with 19 on an abysmal 5-23 shooting night), it was exactly what was needed to eke out the victory.

LeBron didn't necessarily get a ton of help on this night, but his teammates were there for him—mainly Matthew Dellavedova, who played in-your-face defense on Curry and sank two clutch free throws in the game's overtime session to secure the win. Like in Game 1, the Warriors had stormed back after being down double-digits to eventually force OT, but this time LeBron (successfully) took matters into his own hands, driving to the rim time and time again, almost always winding up with a bucket or a pair of free throws for his efforts.

"It's the grit squad that we have," James said afterward. "It's not cute at all. If you're looking for us to play sexy, cute basketball, then that's not us. That's not us right now. Everything is tough. You know, we're going to come in with an aggressive mindset defensively and offensively. And for us to win a Finals game shooting 32 percent from the field, it's just a testament of how gritty we can be. It has to be that for the rest of the series, no matter how many games it takes."**–AF**

Bob Donnan-Pool/Getty Images; Ezra Shaw/Getty Images; Ezra Shaw/Getty Images; Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images; Ezra Shaw/Getty Images; Garrett Ellwood/NBAE via Getty Images

GAME 3

CAVALIERS 96, WARRIORS 91

Quicken Loans Arena, Cleveland

There were numbers, and then there were omens. The numbers said that the Cleveland Cavaliers, playing at home and defying all logic, had wrested control of the NBA Finals with a 96-91 Game 3 win in front of a manic, maroon-clad crowd at the Q. The numbers said that LeBron James was on a mission to prove that regular-season MVP vote a farce, his 40-12-8 line making him responsible for (among other things) scoring or creating 69 percent of the Cavs' points in the series thus far; those same numbers showed LeBron's 123 points were the most through three games in Finals history. Most important, the numbers said the team that wins Game 3 wins the Finals 84 percent of the time.

But then, those omens. Down 7 at halftime and 17 at the end of the third, the Warriors were struggling, out of rhythm and out of sorts—but always only a Curry flurry away from changing everything. Given the stakes and the stage, it might have been Steph's strangest game of the season. After scoring the Dubs' first points on a 25-footer just 90 seconds into the game, Curry didn't score another point until midway through the third quarter. His milk carton performance for those first two and a half quarters was nothing short of surreal; what he did over the final quarter and a half—24 points, including 17 in the final 7:24 of the game—was as familiar as it was dazzling.





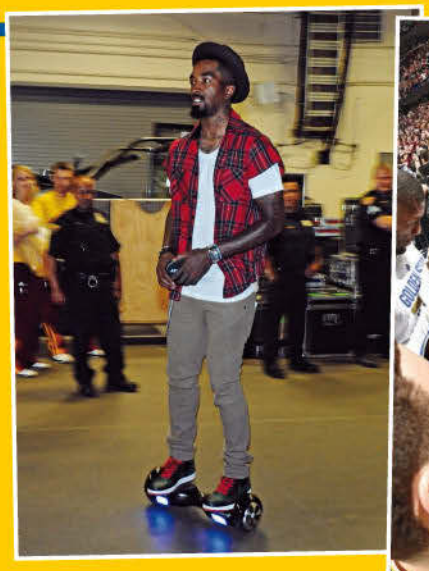
In the end, though, it just wasn't quite enough. Matthew Dellavedova continued his career-making postseason, scoring 20 points and (seemingly) confounding Curry on the other end—though the extent to which it was Delly's D and not Steph's own struggles was a question Curry would be eager to answer as the series went on—while Tristan Thompson continued his contract-boosting play with 10 points and 13 boards. But the game was LeBron's game, just as it this series was clearly LeBron's series. Whether it would be LeBron's title would depend on if his threadbare supporting cast could do enough to hold off the omens, and a Warriors team that seemed too good to hold off forever.–**RYAN JONES**

GAME 4

WARRIORS 103, CAVALIERS 82

Quicken Loans Arena, Cleveland

The momentum belonged to the Cavaliers heading into Game 4 of the NBA Finals, and that initially materialized into a 7-0 lead to open the game. But the deafening crowd in Cleveland was soon muted by Steve Kerr's decision for the Golden State Warriors to go small. While looking to increase pace and tempo, Kerr inserted Andre Iguodala into the starting lineup while moving Draymond Green to center. By the end of the third quarter, LeBron James and the injury-ravaged Cavs were admittedly gassed trying to keep pace and the Dubs eventually capitalized with a 103-82 win.



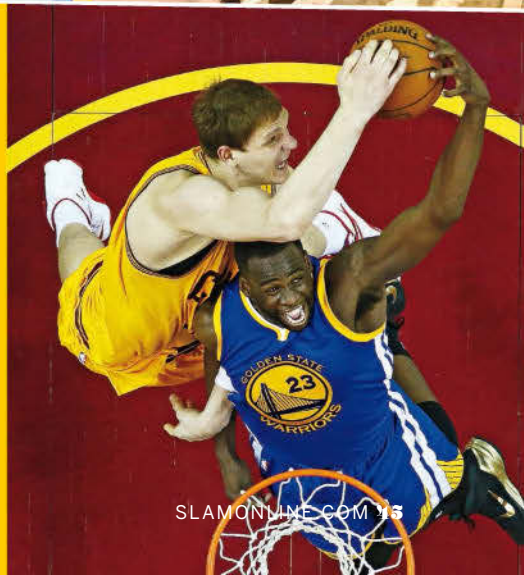


"We made the decision this morning," Kerr said of replacing big man Andrew Bogut with Iguodala to start the game. "And so when I was asked today if Bogut was starting, I lied. Sorry, but I don't think they hand you the trophy based on morality. They give it to you if you win. So sorry about that."

Iguodala unapologetically buried four three-pointers on his way to scoring 22. He also helped slow James to a series-low 20 points on the defensive end and proved to be the biggest reason Golden State would win its biggest game of the year. Stephen Curry provided a steady 22-point effort as well and was supported by the reemergence of Green offensively. While averaging only 9.6 points through the first three games, Draymond nearly doubled that total in Game 4 with 17 to go along with 7 rebounds and 6 assists.

"I think defensively we were still very good," James said following the game. "Offensively we were terrible. You can't always bank on your offense. Sometimes your offense just doesn't show up, and there is no way we go 4-27 from the three-point line and expect to win."

James wasn't lying about how terrible the Cavaliers' offense was in Game 4. Despite totaling 40 points and 23 rebounds from Timofey Mozgov and Tristan Thompson, the Cavs' backcourt couldn't get anything to fall. After throwing in 20 points in Game 3, Dellavedova finished 3-14 from the field. Shumpert shot 2-9, while JR Smith continued to struggle in the Finals missing all eight of his three-point attempts on his way to a 2-12 night from the floor.–**BRENDAN BOWERS**



Mike Ehrmann/Getty Images; Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images; Noah Graham/NBAE via Getty Images; Garrett Ellwood/NBAE via Getty Images; Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images; Ronald Martinez/Getty Images



period of the Finals to keep Cleveland close. Still, Curry's 15 first-half points helped the Warriors lead, 51-50.

As LeBron went into superhuman mode in the third quarter, it felt like maybe the Cavs could steal a game like they did in Game 2, but he simply got no backup. Timofey Mozgov barely played as David Blatt tried to out-small Steve Kerr. Matthew Dellavedova looked every bit the journeyman he once was seen as. JR re-disappeared. I don't have the time or space to list all of the statistical anomalies 1-5 man LeBron James posted, but Twitter was filled with them.

And while the Cavs struggled to mount a TEAM effort in the end of the third quarter and the entire fourth, the Warriors looked every bit the NBA's best. Iguodala continued his unlikely push for MVP with flying plays and key threes. Klay Thompson hit a huge shot. Draymond Green did Draymond Green things. And, oh yeah, Curry went nuts. Treating Dellavedova the way Allen Iverson once treated Tyronn Lue, Steph was at his swashbuckling best in the decisive fourth quarter, scoring 17 points on all manner of crazy shots to finish with 37 points, 7 rebounds, 4 assists and 2 steals.

After the game, with SLAM very publicly in the interview room, LeBron responded to a question about his confidence for Game 6 with his quote about being "the best player in the world."

The King gets no argument from us, but as Sunday night in Oakland wound down, it was pretty clear that wasn't going to be enough to win this series.–**BEN OSBORNE**



GAME 5

WARRIORS 104, CAVALIERS 91

Oracle Arena, Oakland

After some incredibly unpredictable games to start this series off, a pattern had developed by Game 5: the Cavs fight hard, LeBron does the unthinkable, but the Warriors have too much firepower and win.

The first quarter of this one was ugly, with Draymond Green the best Warrior and LeBron (of course) the best Cav. The second quarter saw JR Smith play his only good







GAME 6

WARRIORS, 105, CAVALIERS, 97

Quicken Loans Arena, Cleveland

The city of Cleveland was amped up before Game 6, but the pre-game buzz inside The Q was short-lived. By the end of the first quarter, the Cavs had fallen behind by double digits, and with every Cleveland push thereafter (translation: big shot by LeBron), the Dubs responded in turn.

The Cavs took the lead for a flickering moment in the third quarter, but when Andre Iguodala smashed home a gigantic dunk with 9 minutes left in the third to make it 50-47 Warriors, Golden State never looked back. The Dubs took a 73-61 lead into the fourth quarter.

LeBron did his typical superhero things—incredibly, it was still an 8-point game with 10 minutes left on the strength of some of Bron's 32-point, 18-rebound and 9-dime performance. As a team, though, the Cavaliers shot 39 percent (6-26 from three-point range) and turned the ball over 19 times. Matthew Dellavedova, once a darling of this NBA Finals, finished with just one point in the final defeat.

The Dubs were too deep, too good and too intent on taking the O'Brien home in six. The fourth belonged to Iggy, Stephen Curry and Draymond Green. As Klay Thompson struggled with foul trouble, Curry dazzled, making Iman Shumpert look silly on more than one occasion. Curry finished with 25 points, 8 assists and 6 boards. Green messed around and got a triple-double to the tune of 16 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists—not bad for an oft-overlooked cat.

Iggy had 25, 5 and 5 and was named Finals MVP. "He hit three more threes tonight. Twenty-five points," said Warriors head coach Steve Kerr after the game. "You could make an argument that it could have gone to Steph, it could have gone to LeBron. But for us, it's really fitting that the award went to Andre because he sacrificed his starting role from the first game of the season."

King James' post-game comments were a muted blend of ultimate disappointment and sheer exhaustion. "I'm a guy who tries to be successful in all that I do, and when you fall short, it hurts," said LeBron, who averaged 35.8 points, 13.3 boards and 8.8 dimes while playing 45.7 minutes a game in the series, later adding: "It just wasn't our time."–**ABE SCHWADRON**

Noah Graham/NBAE via Getty Images; John G. Mabanglo-Pool/Getty Images; Joe Murphy/NBAE via Getty Images; Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images; Ezra Shaw/Getty Images; Larry W. Smith Pool/Getty Images

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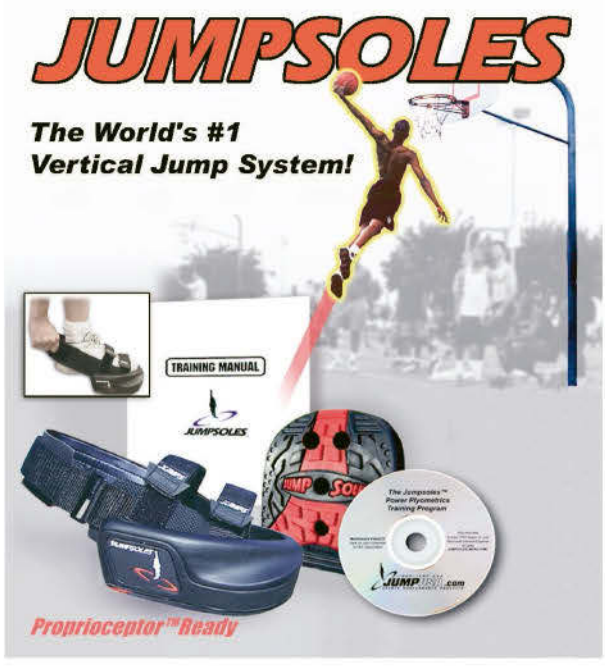
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Russell Westbrook

BIONIC MAN

Face mask or no face mask. KD or no KD. Backcourt mate of Andre Roberson or Dion Waiters. None of it mattered. Every single night Russ laced them, he went all out, balls to the wall, playing a style we've never really seen before. The numbers (28.1 points, 7.3 rebounds, 8.6 assists and 2.1 steals per game—all career-highs) were insane and the visuals weren't too bad, either.

Layne Murdoch Jr./NBAE via Getty Images



Jesse D. Garrabrant /NBAE via Getty Images



LeBron James

HOMECOMING KING

Despite the hatred directed at him when he departed his native Northeast Ohio for Miami back in 2010, the Chosen One came home in dramatic fashion last summer. Once he got settled in and got healthy, LeBron spent the bulk of the '14-15 season giving Cavs fans remarkable all-around play, highlights for days and a virtual one-man act in a scintillating Finals performance. The smiles and high-fives were an added bonus.



Stephen Curry

THE LEAP

It had been clear for a minute that the Warriors' best player had all the makings of a long, All-Star-Game-filled career. But this past season, Steph took his game to a whole nother level *Chris Rock voice.* On the court it came in the form of outrageous range, mixtape-type handles and a leadership style that melded perfectly with new Dubs' coach Steve Kerr. Off it there was the signature shoe, the Drake track, the memes... and a well-earned MVP award.

Noah Graham/NBAE via Getty Images



Derrick Rose

JUST A KID FROM...

It's fair to say we are unabashed supporters of DRose, and that made his late-season/post-season resurgence a highlight of the year for us. He's not back at MVP levels and he may never return to those lofty heights, but we saw enough of his classic grit, twisted-body layups and flying two-handed passes to satisfy our thirst for the time being. Respect to fans from the Chi who stuck with him through thick and thin. Says here that faith will be rewarded.

Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images

DOME SHOTS

All-Star Weekend

FROM EAST POINT TO SHAOLIN

It's hard to make a major dent in the consciousness of the sprawling metropolis SLAM calls home, but All-Star 2015 did its best. There was actual basketball, including the last time local boy Carmelo Anthony suited up this season. There were celebs and parties, from big dogs like Puff and Jay sitting courtside to, shall we say, lesser names like Safaree Samuels bum-rushing the mic at our official All-Star soiree. There were also Hawks—a lot of 'em.



Elsa/Getty Images





Elsa/Getty Images; Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images



Justise Winslow

IN THE END, DUKE

Ignoring the non-stop hype around Kentucky (yes, we're guilty as charged) and brushing aside the team that beat Kentucky, the Blue Devils used their professional-level talent and mindset to methodically work their way through the regular-season and the Tourney, peaking with a complete team effort on the first Monday in April that gave Coach K his fifth National Championship and provided Winslow and Co. with the perfect springboard to the Draft.

Andy Lyons/Getty Images

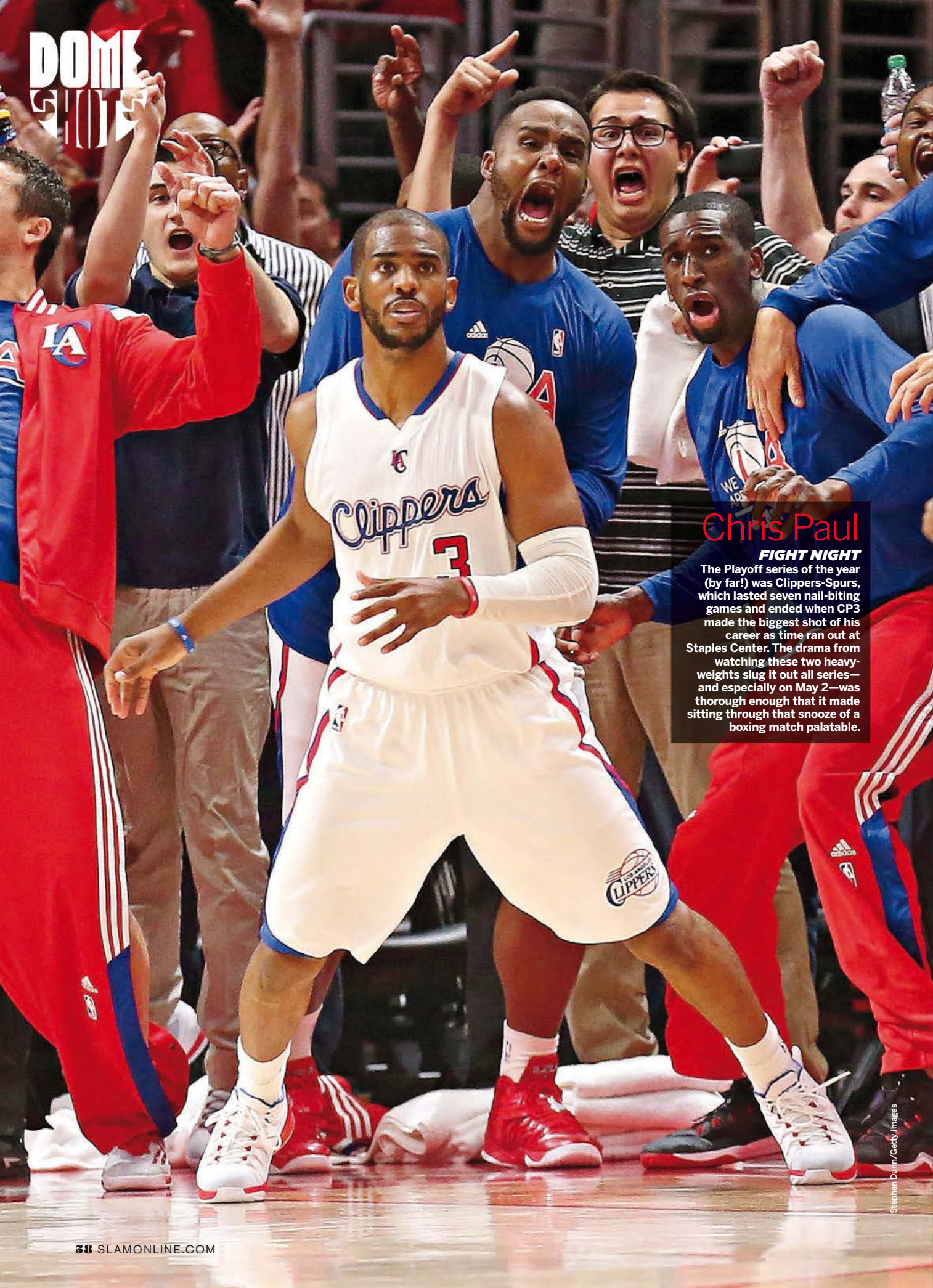


Moriah Jefferson

UCONN DO IT

Just because UConn won its third NCAA title in a row and 10th all time doesn't mean the Huskies should be overlooked. If anything, they should get *more* props. Maybe women's hoops was a regional, overlooked sport back when Geno's run began in 1995, but these days it is a big-time business with programs across the land dedicating time and resources in increasing numbers. And still the Huskies win.

Brian Blanco/Getty Images



Chris Paul

FIGHT NIGHT

The Playoff series of the year (by far!) was Clippers-Spurs, which lasted seven nail-biting games and ended when CP3 made the biggest shot of his career as time ran out at Staples Center. The drama from watching these two heavyweights slug it out all series—and especially on May 2—was thorough enough that it made sitting through that snooze of a boxing match palatable.

Stephen Dunn/Getty Images

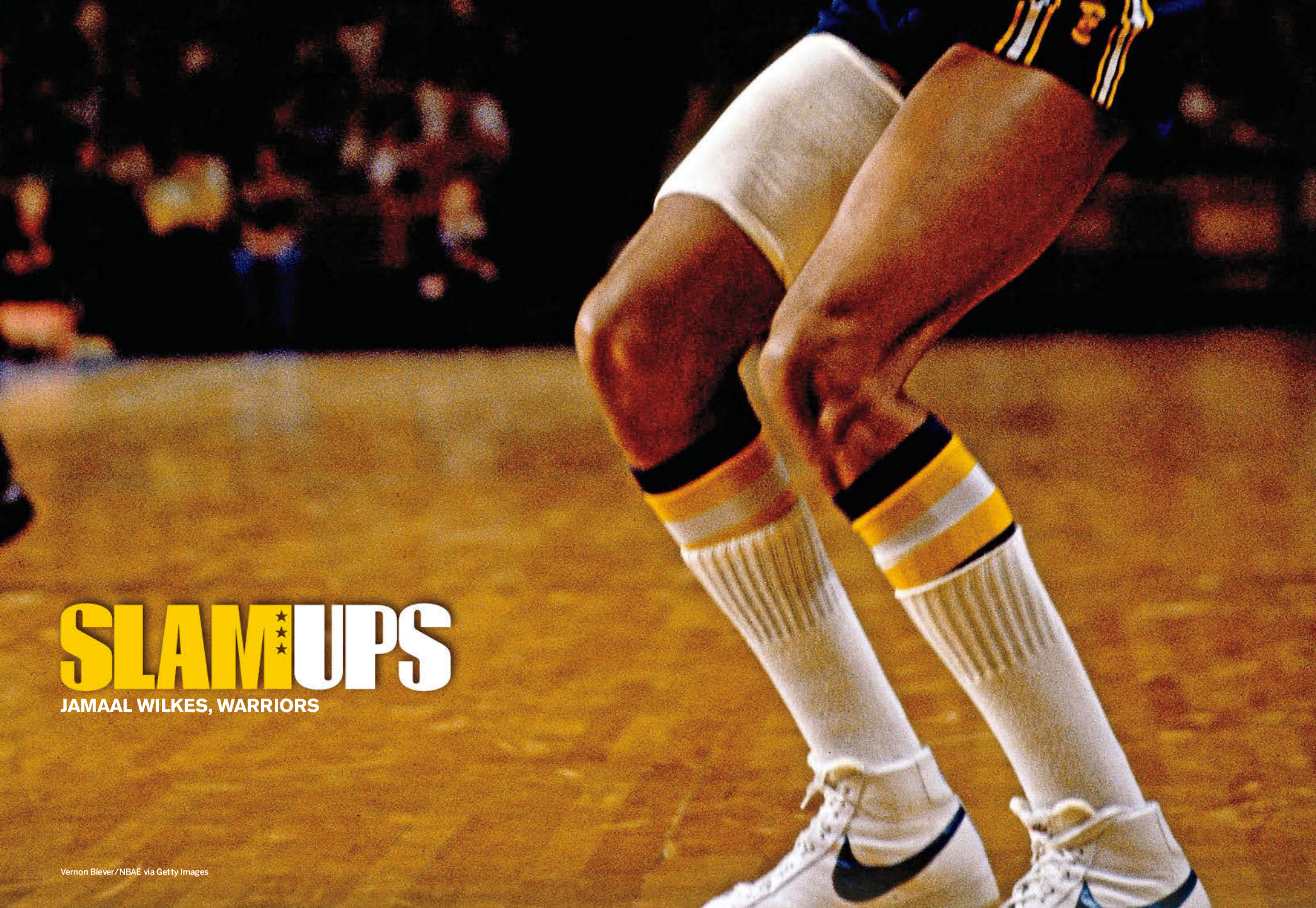


Andrew Wiggins

ONE TO THROW ON

Starting all 82 games in the campaign in which he turned 20 years old proved how ready our SLAM 189 cover subject was for the Show. With decent range, a shockingly mature post-up game and hops for days, this guy is going to be the complete package, and quicker than you expect. Wiggins SZN is coming, indeed.

Jordan Johnson/NBAE via Getty Images



SLAM UPS

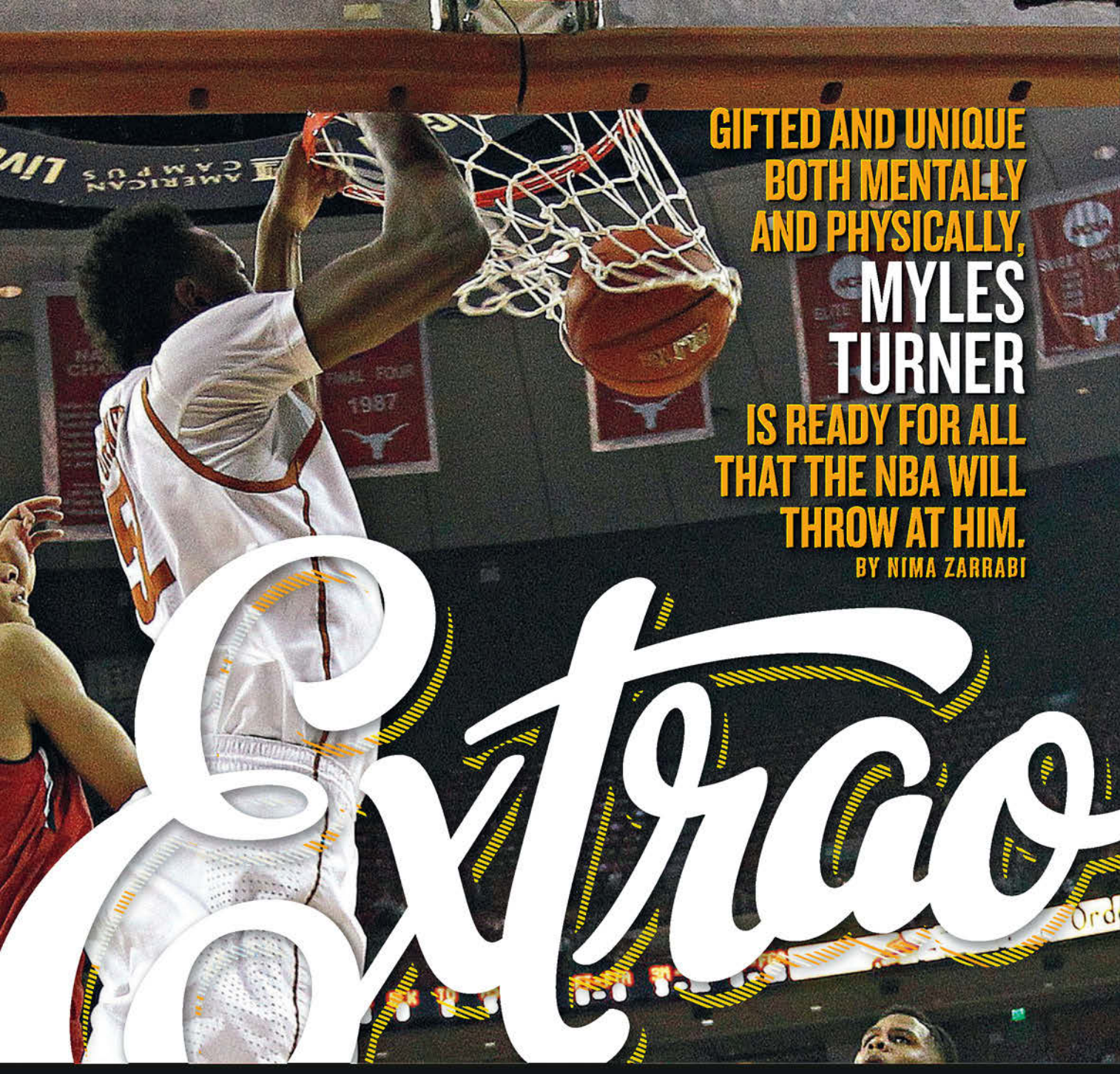
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GIFTED AND UNIQUE BOTH MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY, MYLES TURNER IS READY FOR ALL THAT THE NBA WILL THROW AT HIM.

BY NIMA ZARRABI

Extra

MYLES TURNER HAS A BEAUTIFUL MIND.

There is an intelligence and thoughtfulness that ring out more than his symmetrical sculpted Greek God body that encompasses nearly 7-feet and 240 pounds. He is enthusiastic, curious and decisive. Despite his boundless physical gifts, it is the power of his mind that sets him apart from his contemporaries.

That's not to say that there haven't been any extraordinary basketball men before him, nor is it a knock on anyone else's intelligence or vision for themselves. Turner is a basketball outlier in his draft class—a hybrid big man who is ready to adapt to any demands the game has for him, thanks to a profound combination of body and mind.

He believes there is no secret to his makeup. "It's all my parents," Turner says, proudly. "They raised me to always conduct myself in a professional manner while going out and showing people who I am by expressing myself. My parents raised me to be who I am—I have a lot of growth left. I'm 19 years old and still discovering myself."

Watching Turner perform on the court can be breathtaking at times—to see a man of his stature move with ease and grace while performing guard-type movements is extraordinary. This is where the game is heading, if it isn't planted there already.

Speaking to him is just as fascinating. The Bedford, TX, native listens intently to every single word before articulately formulating a genuine answer with laser-sharp eye contact—attributes that are uncommon at this stage for many.

Turner's agent—20-year vet Andy Miller—has represented dozens of top NBA players during his career, from Kevin Garnett to Chauncey Billups, and even he is in awe.

"I find him already positioned to become the ultimate professional," Miller says. "The areas of his maturity, focus and inability to be distracted—I find it uncanny. I've never seen it before in a 19-year-old. He has a confidence, not arrogance, and he is very patient. His parents did a great job raising him—he seems to have the total package without any prompting or prepping. There is an awareness to him that you just don't teach and that's the thing I find most impressive about him overall."

It's mid-June and some of the League's most prominent

Justin K. Aller/Getty Images, Courtesy of ASM Sports



management executives have descended upon Sin City for the biggest pre-draft workout of the 2015 NBA Draft. As the temperature dial nears 100 degrees, the power brokers begin to roll into the air conditioned confines of Joe Abunassar's Impact Basketball gym—Phil Jackson, Sam Presti, Bob Myers, Mitch Kupchak, Sam Hinkie and Masai Ujiri are among the attendees. Coaches Derek Fisher, Flip Saunders, Dwayne Casey and Lakers owner Jim Buss have even made the trek to the desert—every NBA team is represented.

About 20 NBA prospects will work out—the main attraction is the final session of the day that features Turner and Latvian sensation Kristaps Porzingis, staging his one and only workout on US soil.

The players in the first two groups look good, but the level of intensity and concentration in the building rises when Turner and Porzingis take the floor. The trainers begin with instruction and twin-towers from opposite parts of the world start the biggest job interview of their lives. Turner's grace and skill are quickly apparent. He has a beautiful high release with range stretching out to the NBA three-point line. His consistency on jumpers from 15-20 feet from various platforms across the court evokes a classic LaMarcus Aldridge comp. The footwork in the post is swift and natural, finishing with clean running hooks and shots off the glass.

The workout moves to the pick-and-roll stage and this is where Turner clearly translates at the next level. His combination of length, handles and shooting range make him a nightmare to deal with in the P&R game. There were several instances in the workout where it seemed as if everyone was witnessing the workout of two highly skilled European big men—that's truly a nod to how nice Turner's game is. He has the cerebral and fundamental skills often seen in Euro bigs, fused nicely with instincts and an unreal athleticism and agility for a man his size. That's what Turner wants to prove more than anything—he can run up and down the court quickly, filling lanes and finishing on a consistent basis. To display his versatility, Turner dribbles the full length of the court, completing transition dunks so scouts get a solid feel for his natural movement up and down the hardwood within open space.



Elsa/Getty Images

He does not disappoint, closing ground on 94-feet in very few steps, ending the drill with a nice Scottie Pippen signature up-and-under slam that is Dunk Contest worthy.

Afterward, as Turner conducts several on-court interviews with media, he's soaking wet in sweat and adrenaline, pounding water in between questions. "I think it went well and I was able to go out and showcase the stuff I've been working on for the past two months," Turner says. "I didn't notice all the people in the stands, but I knew they would be here. I have much more that I can showcase with teams individually. I think overall it was a success."

Last year at the Nike Hoop Summit, Turner heard the chirping.

There was some discussion going around about his awkward running style and potential for future injuries due to his gait. Turner was surprised and baffled at the news, but he took a proactive approach following his freshman campaign at Texas. After huddling with Miller, long-time trainer Ken Roberson and his father Ken about the issue, Turner scheduled an evaluation at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York. Following extensive testing, Turner was found to have no issues. The hospital provided a detailed 27-page report, sent to every NBA team, stressing that Myles was completely healthy but needs to improve strength in his core and glutes as he continues to fill out his frame. "This is really about me growing into my body, getting acclimated to the way that I'm growing," says Turner, a late bloomer who stood at 6-2 as an eighth grader. "I'm getting stronger and that's probably the most important thing for my body as I develop. The visit was to give everyone assurance that there is nothing to see here—that's really what the point was. I let the teams know that I am ready to go and there are no adjustments that I need to undertake medically."

The transition his body has made since the final game of his freshman year at Texas has been remarkable—physically it appears that everything has aligned for him at the best possible time. He's faster, more agile and sleek. At Texas, he was primarily used to initiate offense on the perimeter, far from the basket, but Turner is most comfortable in the post, either facing up or backing down defenders, and he is eager to show it. "You need to be adaptable in today's NBA moving forward," Turner says. "The norm now is players that can defend and play multiple positions. I think I have a strong ability to do that. I pride myself on being able to play more than one position." Turner's versatility as a stretch big man and rim protector—he led the Big 12 in blocks last season with 2.7 per—is heavily valued by NBA lottery teams and scouts from the analytics community. His game clearly translates at the next level as he projects much better as an NBA player than a collegian, where he posted per-game averages of 10.1 points and 6.5 rebounds and earned Big 12 freshman of the year honors.

Off the court, there may not be a more prepared rookie when it comes to the rigors of the pro life—Turner has zero character concerns and is confident he can adapt to any situation due to his roots and preparation at UT. He is a young man who is extremely comfortable in his own skin and is not easily influenced by his peers. It's a healthy confidence that allowed him to thoroughly enjoy his time in Austin as a student-athlete, where he was fond of riding his bike on campus and spending time at the lake or amid hip parts of downtown. He already misses his college town and intends on residing there during his offseasons, eventually planning to go back to school to earn his degree after he completes a few NBA seasons.

While Turner's personality and outlook is unique in today's NBA, there is no reason to be alarmed from a passion standpoint—this is an elite basketball player with a love for the game. He's not worried about fitting in or earning the respect of his new teammates—adaptation is what Turner prides himself on. It's practically guaranteed.

"I think I will be able to make the NBA transition just fine," Turner says with a smile. "As far as the locker room goes, I will find the right veteran to learn from and I'll do whatever it takes to succeed." $

"MY PARENTS RAISED ME TO CONDUCT MYSELF IN A PROFESSIONAL MANNER WHILE GOING OUT AND SHOWING PEOPLE WHO I AM BY EXPRESSING *myself*."



Chris Covatta/Getty Images

UPTOWN FUNK



BY BOBBITO GARCIA

1950. HARLEM.

Fourth grader Bob McCullough, a pre-teen gang member of the Politicians, was raiding places at lunchtime, getting in fights every day and got arrested. His Saint Phillips Community Center (aka St. C) basketball coach, Holcombe Rucker, went to the 32nd Precinct...

"Hey Ruck, what you doing here?" young McCullough inquired.

"Checking up on knuckleheads like you!"

McCullough started doing his homework, became St. C's top scorer, and in 1965 was the second leading scorer in the nation (right behind future Hall of Famer Rick Barry) with 36.4 ppg while at Benedict College.

"Rucker changed my life," McCullough says.

In his years as an educator, coach and community activist, Holcombe Rucker helped hundreds of other Harlem youth get into better schools, using basketball as a tool for social change. Rucker's most lasting legacy though was to invent the idea in 1946 of producing an outdoor youth league during the summer.

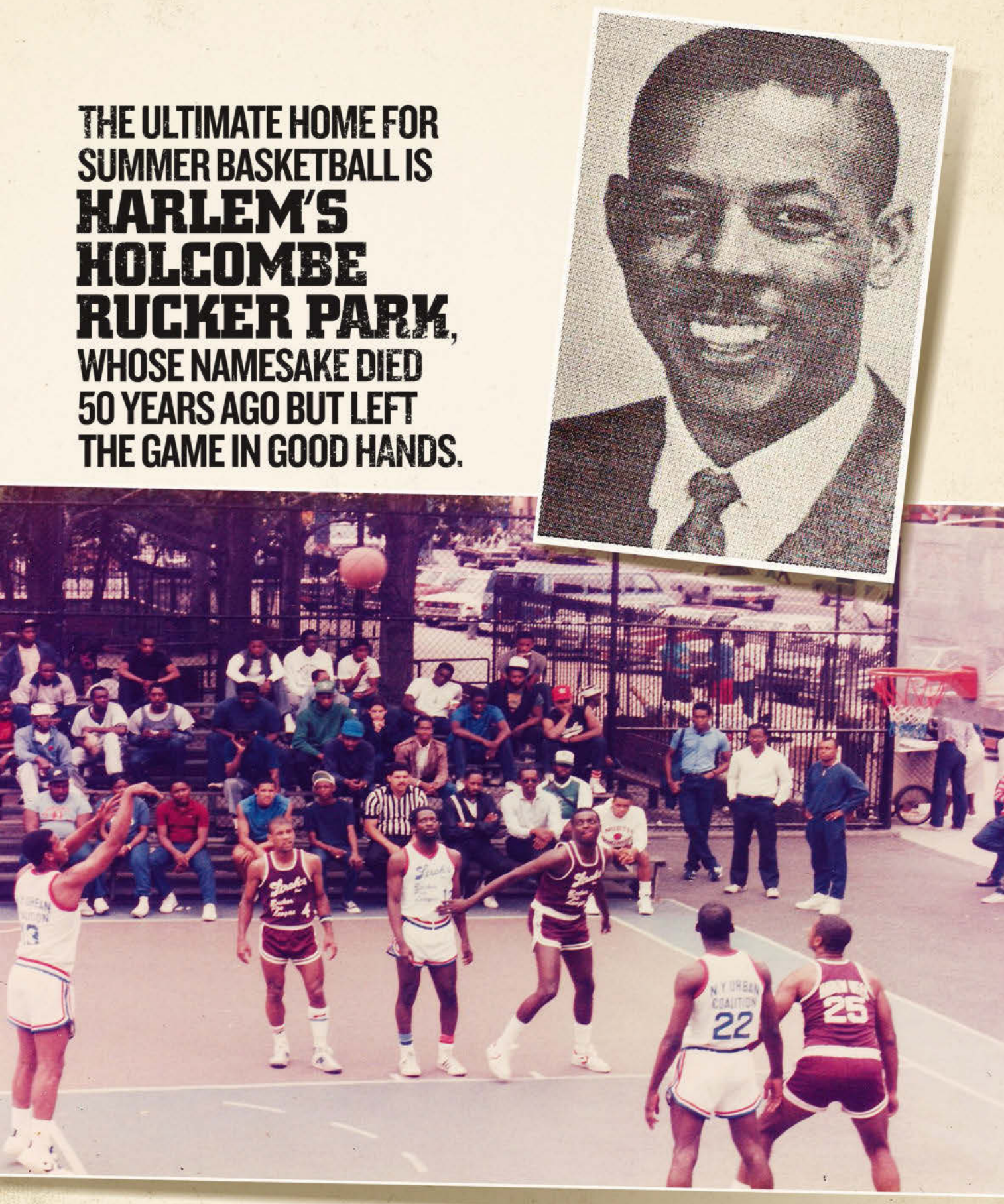
Believe it or not, one had never before existed—anywhere in the world.

During the 1950s, Rucker added college and pro divisions, and the very best ballplayers around participated: Ed Warner, the 1950 NIT Championship MVP for City College (CCNY) who weeks later led his squad to the NCAA Championship as well (the only team in history to win both in the same season); Sihugo Green from Duquesne, the 1955 NIT Championship MVP and No. 1 pick of the 1956 NBA Draft (ahead of Bill Russell); and future Hall of Fame inductees Connie Hawkins from Brooklyn and Wilt Chamberlain from Philly, just to name a few.



All Photos courtesy of Rucker Pro Legends

THE ULTIMATE HOME FOR SUMMER BASKETBALL IS HARLEM'S HOLCOMBE RUCKER PARK, WHOSE NAMESAKE DIED 50 YEARS AGO BUT LEFT THE GAME IN GOOD HANDS.



The late Holcombe Rucker (top) had a vision for summer hoops in his beloved Harlem that, in the 50 years since his passing, has come to life in ways even he could not have imagined.

What Holcombe Rucker achieved was unprecedented and incomparable in any era. Ruck kept the game clock on his watch, score on a sheet of paper in his hand, and tournament schedule folded up in his back pocket. Oh, he also reffed! Meanwhile, traffic jams would form outside the court on 128th Street and 7th Avenue, which everyone in the hood affectionately called "Rucker Park," to see playground legend Isaac "The Rab" Walthour dominate all the household names that tried to stand in his way.

Mr. Rucker laid down the blueprint for every organized outdoor summer basketball tournament/event/league, on any competition level that has ever been done since. He is The Godfather. The "Grand Daddy." Not only did he create a platform for his community to enjoy the purest bball imaginable—for free—he also inspired generations moving forward to this day to want, or even better, dream, of one day playing in New York, outdoors, at the Rucker.

Unfortunately, Holcombe Rucker died of cancer in 1965. He was just 38.

A committee was formed to keep Rucker's youth league moving forward, but without a pro division. McCullough, fresh out of college, had a different plan. "The creator of the Rucker was my surrogate father," McCullough says. "I went to college and was drafted by the NBA [*Cincinnati Royals—Ed.*], all because I was a product of his guidance. He changed my whole life. And the pro division wasn't going to be. I told [former St. C teammate] Freddie Crawford I will run the pro tournament."

Crawford, the 26th pick in the 1964 NBA Draft who went on to play for the Knicks and Lakers, joined forces with McCullough. Imagine a tournament being run by two NBA-caliber players? What top talent would think twice about getting down with that level of co-sign?

In 1967, Crawford brought down fellow Knick Willis Reed, who was named Pro Rucker MVP. In '69, half the Knicks' squad, including starters Walt Frazier and Bill Bradley, played in the Pro Rucker. That very next NBA season, the franchise won its first league championship. Coincidence? Hardly.

In 1970, sportswriter Pete Axthelm published his book *The City Game,* which detailed for the first time to the rest of the world what exactly was going on up in Harlem, including the high-jumping legends of Earl "The Goat" Manigault and "Helicopter" Herman Knowings. The Rucker was no longer a treasured weekly community event. It was now on worldwide radar, and the stage was set for the ultimate explosion that took place the following summer.



Above: Charlie Scott, Connie Hawkins and Bob McCullough
Below: PONY's presence at Rucker Park including this team sponsored by Peter Vecsey (far right)
Opposite: Rucker greats included Joe Hammond (far left)

In 1971, Julius Erving finished his college season at UMass averaging 26.9 points and 19.5 rebounds a game, but no one in New York had ever seen him play or had even heard about him. That is, until his first appearance at the Rucker…

In the immortal words of United Brooklyn coach Sid Jones (RIP): "My friend told me, 'There's a Rucker player who is better than Connie Hawkins and Elgin Baylor and can jump from the corner and dunk. They call him 'The Claw.'"

Erving told the announcer that his nickname was "The Doctor," and a playground legend, as big as there ever was or will be, was born. The NCAA didn't allow dunking in that era, so with the crowd *oohing* and



"HOLCOMBE RUCKER BROUGHT THE PRO GAME TO THE YOUNGSTERS IN HARLEM WHO COULD NOT AFFORD TO BUY A TICKET TO SEE THE KNICKS AT THE GARDEN. AND HE DID IT FOR FREE."
—BUTCH PURCELL



aahing to Erving's above-the-rim assault on every play, even in the pre-game lay-up line, the Doc kept elevating his creativity to heights unseen in that day and age.

Erving went on to win championships, MVPs, scoring titles and dunk contests in both the ABA and NBA, and is generally considered one of the most influential basketball players ever. Basically, Erving was the Michael Jordan of the '70s. And he completely credits his summers spent at the Rucker as the catalyst to his style of play.

How tough was the Pro Rucker in 1971? Erving's teammate was Charlie Scott, who in '71-72 led the ABA in scoring with 34.6 ppg, and eventually won an NBA chip in '76 with the Celtics. With all that firepower, Erving and Scott couldn't even win the '71 Rucker Championship. The league MVP that season was Nate "Tiny" Archibald, who in '72-73 led the NBA in both scoring (34.0 ppg) and assists (11.4), a feat never accomplished before or since.

Erving, Scott and Archibald all got buckets in the NBA, but in 1971, the high scorer at the Rucker was Richard "Pee Wee" Kirkland, a Chicago Bulls draftee who never played in the league but wrecked havoc while talking plenty smack at 155th Street and 8th Avenue. And the most notable scorer Uptown was Kirkland's backcourt partner, Joe Hammond.

Nicknamed "The Destroyer," Hammond's rep at Rucker in 1971 earned him a try-out with the L.A. Lakers. According to legend, Hammond destroyed a young Pat Riley in a one-on-one, impressed Wilt Chamberlain during a shooting drill and was offered a contract, which he subsequently turned down.

That next season, the Lakers set the record for most consecutive wins (33) during the regular season (which still stands), went 69-13 (a record that wouldn't be broken for 24 years) and won the NBA Championship. That's how good they were. And they wanted Joe Hammond. That's how good he was.

In 1978, Hammond scored 73 points at a Rucker game. Not even four-time NBA scoring champion Kevin Durant, who in 2011 dropped 66 at an EBC Tournament match, could break Hammond's park record. Something special occurred in the '70s...

"It can never be duplicated," Butch Purcell declared. Purcell coached Erving, Scott and other Rucker legends in the '70s alongside future NBA analyst Peter Vecsey, and they won multiple championships. "Rucker came before West 4th, the Sonny Hill/Baker League in Philly, the Drew League in L.A. It was the only tournament in town. People came from all over the country to see."

The influence of the Pro Rucker under McCullough's direction post-1965 had layers that went way beyond what Holcombe had started innocently in the '40s. The summer tournament produced future NBA referees and scorekeepers (some of whom are still active to this day), and became the first outdoor league that major corporate sponsors sought out. Major media outlets followed suit, including ESPN, who in 1980, their first year as a cable network, televised the championship.

The Pro Rucker even impacted street culture beyond basketball. "If you were involved in hip-hop or if you were involved with playing basketball, you had to come across each other," Crazy Legs, the most recognizable b-boy the world has ever known, recounts. "Whether it be Dyckman, The Goat or The Rucker, there were always hip-hop jams going on."

The Pro Rucker was also the first ever target for sneaker brands' summer basketball marketing, loooong before AAU squads were bopping around the country. In 1977, PONY started handing out free sneakers from a car trunk, to the top players at '55th. The strategy worked, as they earned quick relevance in the toughest city to crack for kicks. Rucker was the weekly showcase, the hypebeast.com platform but live, for hot releases people weren't up on yet.

In honor of Holcombe Rucker's contributions to Harlem's youth as well as the global basketball community, the NYC Parks & Recreation Department officially dedicated the playground on 155th Street and 8th Avenue in his name. In Rucker's physical absence, his loyal student Bob McCullough cemented his mentor's legacy into the hallowed asphalt from 1965 until 1987, when McCullough ended the Pro Rucker and passed the torch, and park permit, to a young Greg Marius, tournament director of the EBC, which still holds court today. It was a kind gesture, one that would have made Mr. Rucker proud, since one of his favorite sayings was, "Each one, teach one."

"It's the 50th Anniversary of the Pro Rucker, but more importantly, it's the 50th anniversary of Rucker's death," shared Butch Purcell. "Rucker brought the pro game to the youngsters in Harlem who could not afford to buy a ticket to see the Knicks at the Garden. And he did it for free."

Holcombe Rucker is not enshrined in the Naismith Hall of Fame, yet his name is as recognizable across generations as any other in the sport. The game was birthed in Springfield but bball was raised in New York. Outdoors. In Harlem. At the Rucker. The NBA Vegas Summer League should pay tribute. So should any and every tournament, anywhere in the world. S

PEDAL TO THE METAL

FOUR-TIME ALL-STAR BEN WALLACE HUSTLED HARD ENOUGH TO MAKE IT OUT OF A SMALL TOWN IN ALABAMA AND BECOME A DOMINANT FORCE IN THE NBA.

BY YARON WEITZMAN

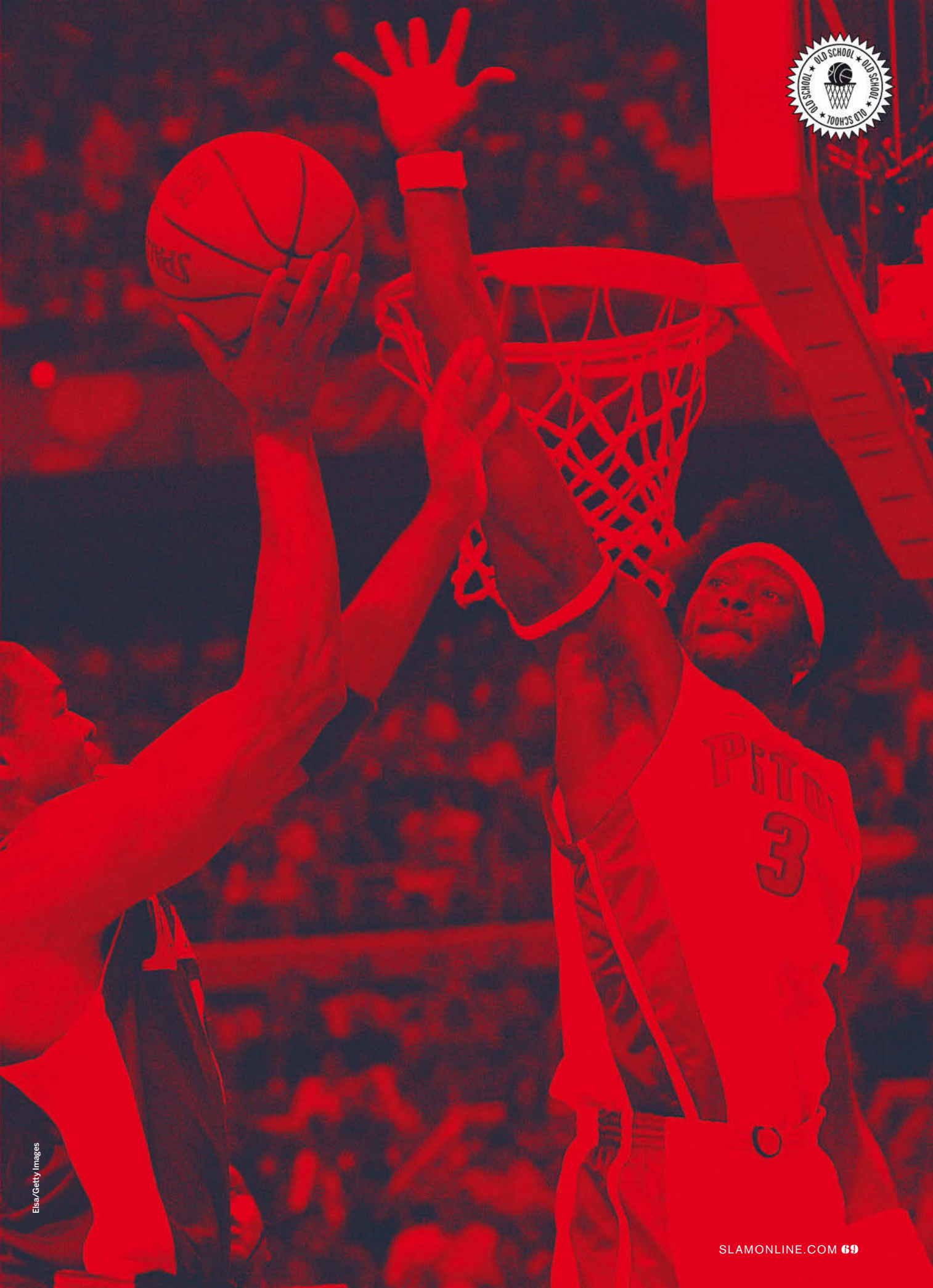
Michael Bruce was working a busy morning shift for a Florida-based remote control car shop named Super Hobbies when the big man with the puffy hair walked in. It was a hot August day 16 years ago and Ben Wallace was looking for ways to make his cars go faster and look nicer. Maybe some engines, or new tires, or a different shade of paint.

Ever since he was a kid growing up in White Hall, AL, a tiny town with a population of about 1,000, Wallace had been interested in gadgets. He loved taking things apart, putting them back together and then seeing if they still worked. Once, when he was just 6 years old, he broke one of his older brother's remote control cars. Wallace grew up in a poor household with 10 siblings; he was the second youngest child and the family's baby boy. There weren't many toys to go around and Wallace was afraid of what might happen if his brothers found out he ruined one of the few the family had.

So, he fixed it. He took a look at the damage and diagnosed the problem. Just like that, Wallace was hooked. Basketball would eventually become his meal ticket out of Alabama, but his passion for remote control cars wasn't something he left behind. NBA paychecks only meant that Wallace could afford to turn this hobby into an obsession.

"He's like an engineer in a basketball player's body," says Darvin Ham, a former teammate and long-time friend of Wallace's.

A 1999 trade that sent Wallace from the Bullets—who signed him in 1996 after he graduated



Elsa/Getty Images

from DII Virginia Union—to the Magic allowed him to discover a remote control car hobby shop located about 13 miles east of Orlando in Casselberry, FL, and owned by a man named Robbie Michaels. Wallace now lives in Richmond, VA, but he still places orders with Super Hobbies. Every two weeks he calls Michaels with a request and then takes his new toys about 100 miles east to a track in Virginia Beach.

Over the years he's also become close with one of Michaels' employees, Michael Bruce, whom he met when he first walked in the store. Bruce has spent time in Wallace's home and his garage, which is filled with nearly 100 remote control cars, some of which cost up to $1,000 and all of which were built with Wallace's own hands. He's seen the small tire tracks that blanket the house's full-length outdoor basketball court.

"We don't play a lot of ball out here," Wallace said to Bruce the first time he visited. "We mostly run the cars."

NBA players deal with retirement differently. Some go into coaching and try to stay as close to the game as possible. Others find broadcasting jobs. Some prefer to live out their golden years in solitude, far away from the spotlight.

Ask Ben Wallace how he's spending his, and all he wants to discuss are his toy cars.

"You're putting something you built against something that someone else built," Wallace says. "It's the competition, and seeing something you put together work the way you intended it to."

Wallace was always drawn to competition. It's how, despite "needing to put shoes on and wear three pairs of orthotics just to get to 6-7," according to Chauncey Billups, who played with Wallace in Detroit, and despite as a rookie being told by the Bullets coaching staff to go work out with the team's guards, Wallace was able to transform himself into one of the game's top centers and a four-time Defensive Player of the Year. That ability helped lead the Pistons to five straight Eastern Conference Finals and a 2004 Finals win over the three-time defending Champion Los Angeles Lakers.

"Did I think I was better than Shaq? No," Wallace says when asked how he guarded the much larger Shaquille O'Neal during that series. "But that doesn't mean I was going to roll over for him. He was going to have to earn his stripes. I just wanted to compete."

And that he did. Wallace used his mind, octopus arms and ox-like strength to make up for his lack of height. "He was so good at anticipating things," says Billups. "I made two All-Defensive teams and I attribute them both to Ben Wallace. He's the best I've ever seen at being able to block a shot and take a charge."

Wallace averaged just 5.7 points per game and shot just 47 percent from the field through his career. But he corralled every rebound in sight, sealed off the path to the rim and was adroit at making himself useful on the offensive end.

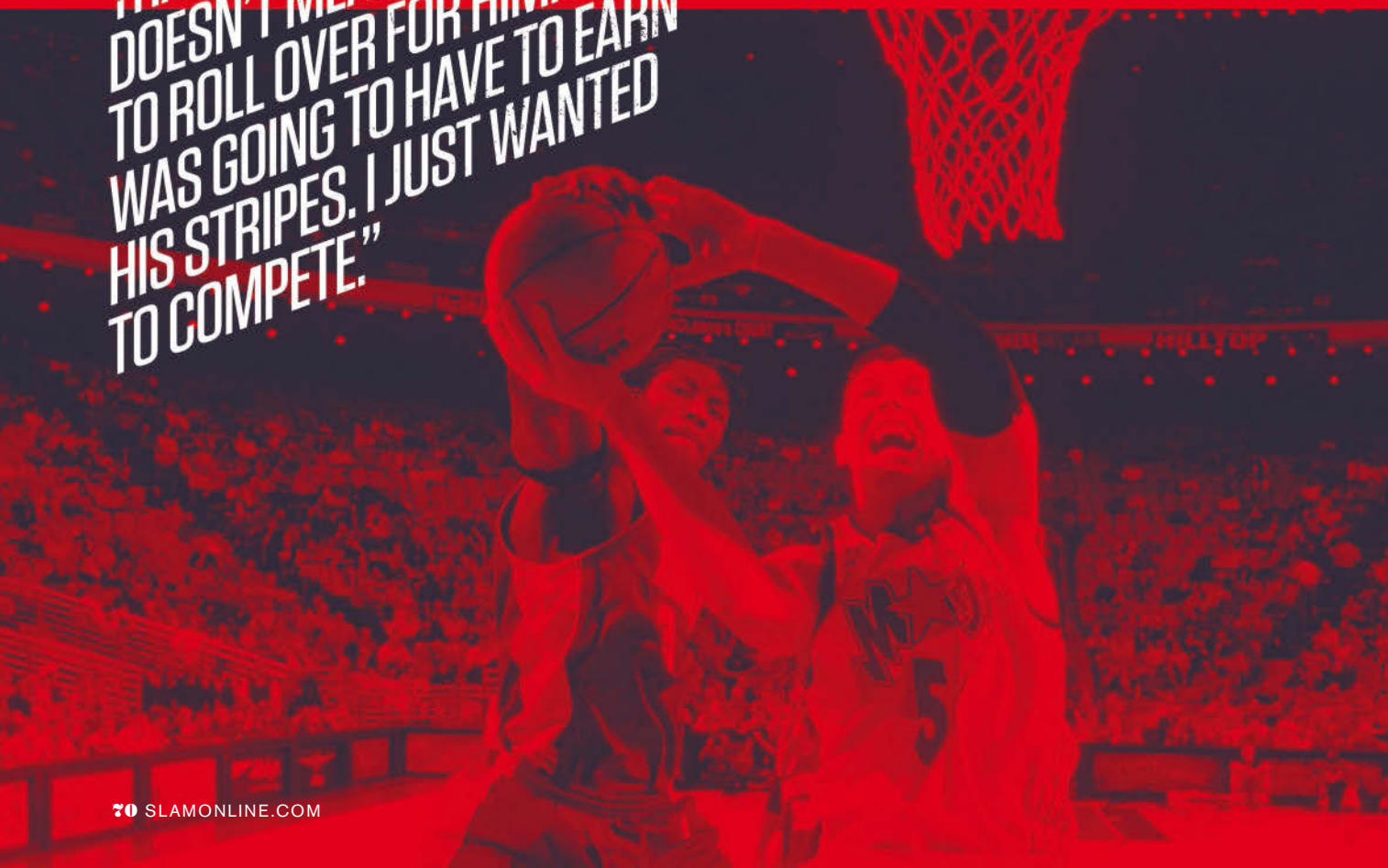
"His ability to help a team without the basketball was special," says Tayshaun Prince, another one of Wallace's Detroit teammates. "He wasn't a great scorer, but he was still able to use his IQ to create points."

That IQ is something that Wallace, now 40 and in his third year of retirement, wanted to impart on young basketball players everywhere. So six years ago he used some of the $88 million he made during his 16-year NBA career to build a gym in Richmond, right off Route 195.

"I always wanted to give back to the community and I couldn't start a school or anything like that," he says. "Basketball is what I knew."

The words BIG BEN'S HOME-COURT are engraved in red letters at half court. Banners celebrating Wallace's achievements hang on the walls. The facility also has some offices and a weight room. Wallace is there about four times a week. His remote control cars can often be seen zipping through the hallways. Most of the time he can be

"DID I THINK I WAS BETTER THAN SHAQ? NO. BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN I WAS GOING TO ROLL OVER FOR HIM. HE WAS GOING TO HAVE TO EARN HIS STRIPES. I JUST WANTED TO COMPETE."



found honing his ping-pong skills on the sideline or lifting weights.

Wallace's signature Afro is no more. His thick dark hair is now cut short and specked with patches of gray. But from the neck down Big Ben still looks like the man who was nicknamed "Body" by his teammates in Detroit.

It's when he's convinced to lace up his sneakers and step on to the court that Wallace looks different. Games against newcomers typically follow the same series of events. Wallace fields the ball on the perimeter and is given room by whomever is guarding him. He'll then rise up and bury a jump shot over a stunned defender.

"The guy who plays in the gym is a completely different player than the one who played in the NBA," says Spurs forward and Virginia native Reggie Williams. "He brings the ball up and shoots jumpers. The first time I came through and saw him I was shocked."

Wallace attempted just 51 three-pointers during his NBA career and made just 7. He was also a 41 percent free-throw shooter. A pure jump shot is not a skill basketball fans associate with him. And yet, when he plays in his Richmond gym, "he's getting buckets," says Billups. "He's got a mean handle, too. It's hilarious."

"I'm not going to go into the gym and just rebound and stuff like that," Wallace says. "The way I played in the League was work for me. Now I get a chance to go out and play basketball."

But life hasn't been all smiles recently. In February 2014, at around 2:00 a.m. on a Saturday, Wallace drove his Cadillac Escalade through a fence on Henrico County, VA, and crashed into a tree. He then fled the scene before officers arrived. A month later, following an investigation, Wallace was arrested.

It was the second time in three years that Wallace had been placed in cuffs. In September 2011, he was pulled over for driving recklessly. He was later charged with drunken driving and unlawfully carrying a concealed weapon and was sentenced to a year of probation. The second time Wallace was sentenced to a year in prison, with all but two days suspended. He spent one night in jail.

"I felt like I disappointed the people around me," Wallace says. "Being there, it really hits you that your freedom, the ability to do things like get up and get water from the kitchen because you're thirsty, can be taken away from you."

Wallace won't go into details about his second arrest or why he decided to leave the scene of the crash. But he's sanguine about the experience. He does point out that, where he grew up, in a tough neighborhood surrounded by gangs and drugs and boys spending their days on the streets instead of in school, prison often seemed like an inevitable destination.

"Where I came from, if you had told me that by the time I was 40 the worst thing people would be able to say about me is that I spent one night in jail, I'd say I'm still winning," Wallace says. "I'm proud of what I've done. My life could have gone in a lot of different directions. But looking back, I feel like when it was time to make those big decisions, I made the right ones."

So now Wallace gets to enjoy a life that kids from White Hall aren't supposed to have. He can play pool and drink Coronas. He can go fishing with Dave Robbins, his Virginia Union coach. He can spend time helping out the basketball team at his alma mater. He can watch cartoons like *Teen Titans* with his 9-year-old daughter and two older sons. He can keep in touch with the starting lineup from that Championship Pistons team in a group chat. ("Rasheed is the instigator," he says.)

And, of course, he can race his toy cars. In April, Wallace and five friends piled into his black Ford F-650 and the accompanying trailer that Wallace uses to transport his collection and drove 13 hours south to Orlando to compete in a race. There was no prize to be won and Wallace doesn't even remember what place he finished in.

What he does remember is how he felt watching his creations speed around the track. He had taken metal scraps and turned them into an efficient machine that could travel 90 miles per hour. This was a life he never thought he would have. It is a damn good one. S



Fernando Medina /NBAE/Getty Images; Greg Shamus/NBAE/Getty Images

THE FAN



CHECK OUT HOW PEOPLE REP THEIR TEAMS. WHAT'S YOUR STYLE?

Fashion trends come and go, but one thing that will never go out of style is supporting your squad. Big congrats to Dub Nation for their first title in 40 years! Even though the parade is over and done, Warriors fans can keep the spirit alive all offseason with this Championship tee and hat, the very same ones worn by Stephen and Co. right after the final buzzer sounded. "CoCo" forever!

To get your own authentic NBA gear, head to NBAStore.com.



KICKS OFF COURT



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Nike Air Zoom Vomero 10 Out now, $140



PUMA R698 Brights Out now, $130



Reebok Ventilator Pop Out now, $75



Reebok Ventilator Adapt ST August 1, $80



Timberland Adventure 2.0 Cupsole Chukka
July 24, $100



SUPER SNEAKS

ADIDAS IS USING INSPIRATION FROM THE BIG SCREEN WITH ITS NEWEST LINE OF KICKS.

One of the five highest-grossing films of all time, *Avengers: Age of Ultron,* follows the gang as they work together to battle Ultron, a mechanical A.I. (artificial intelligence, not Allen Iverson) intent on destroying mankind. Which begs the question: If NBA ballers get their own signature sneakers, shouldn't the heroes saving the world, too?

At one point in the film, Hawkeye says to Scarlet Witch, "If you step outside that door, you're an Avenger." Thanks to adidas, that's now true even for us non-superheroes—at least when it comes to kicks.

The adidas Basketball x Marvel Avengers Collection, released on July 4 in partnership with Marvel Studios, includes limited edition colorways of the adidas Crazy 97, adidas T-Mac 1, adidas Top Ten 2000 and adidas Real Deal (all with a $125 price tag). Each sneaker is modeled after a particular Avengers superhero, each with the Avengers logo on the tongue.

Tony Stark's adidas Top Ten 2000 "Iron Man" has an iced-out sole to represent the propulsion thrusters of the Iron Man suit and an all-red metallic upper with gold midsole to mirror his armor's color scheme in the comics and movies. Look closely and you'll even find the arc reactor in Iron Man's chest, symbolized on the heel with a circular emblem.

The "Captain America" colorway of the adidas Crazy 97 has his signature red, white and blue paint job and features a metallic finish to represent the Captain's shield. The "A" emblem on the shoe's upper shifts colors from different angles. Meanwhile, Thor is laced in the adidas Real Deal, with a reflective upper that includes a flashing lightning bolt—a nod to Thor's Hammer. Plus, it has gold and gray accents, an ode to Thor's armor and specifically his chest plate.

But the adidas T-Mac 1 "Hulk" might be the flyest of all the Avengers color schemes, with the iconic radioactive green glow and purple accents (for Hulk's pants). The metallic pattern on the upper mimics Hulk's crazy muscly physique. Even the "Hulk Smash" logo is present, above the heel where T-Mac's number once sat.

You better go cop these kicks; you don't want to make Hulk angry.–**ABE SCHWADRON**

PUNKS

RIDE WIT ME

GET READY: ST. LOUIS-BRED JAYSON TATUM HAS NEXT.

WORDS **FRANKLYN CALLE** ★ PORTRAITS **ATIBA JEFFERSON**

After posing for photos with the iconic Gateway Arch behind him, Jayson Tatum is walking up the block preparing to continue his SLAM photo shoot in the surrounding streets of downtown St. Louis without trying to draw too much attention. But as he turns the corner of Chestnut and North 4th Street, a doorman at the Hyatt Regency Hotel recognizes him. "Hey man, so where are you going to go to school?"

Tatum, caught off-guard softly responds, "Not sure yet, man," while walking past an entrance toward Pine Street.

"That happens all day, every day," says Tatum, considered by many the top-ranked small forward in the Class of '16. "There's always someone asking or suggesting where I should go."

Understandably, it's a topic many in the recruiting (and local) community are now closely evaluating as the 6-8 stud prepares to announce a decision at some point in July, with St. Louis University among the final four schools on his list. His dad Justin played for the Billikens from 1998-2001 and the program now finds itself competing against Duke, North Carolina and Kentucky for the younger Tatum's services.

Having started on varsity since his freshman year, Tatum is following in the footsteps of Brad Beal and David Lee as the latest five-star prospect from Chaminade College Prep. The Beal and Tatum families go back to when Beal's mom, Besta, coached Tatum's mom, Brandy Cole, in prep volleyball.

"Sometimes we would get pizza after school with his twin brothers," recalls Tatum, of when Beal would drive him home as a seventh grader. "We would wait an hour 'cause he was signing autographs. People used to say that would be me, but I couldn't imagine it. I thought that was crazy. But now I get the same attention."

At Chaminade, he hit the ground running, becoming the first freshman in league history to win Metro Catholic Conference Player of the Year.

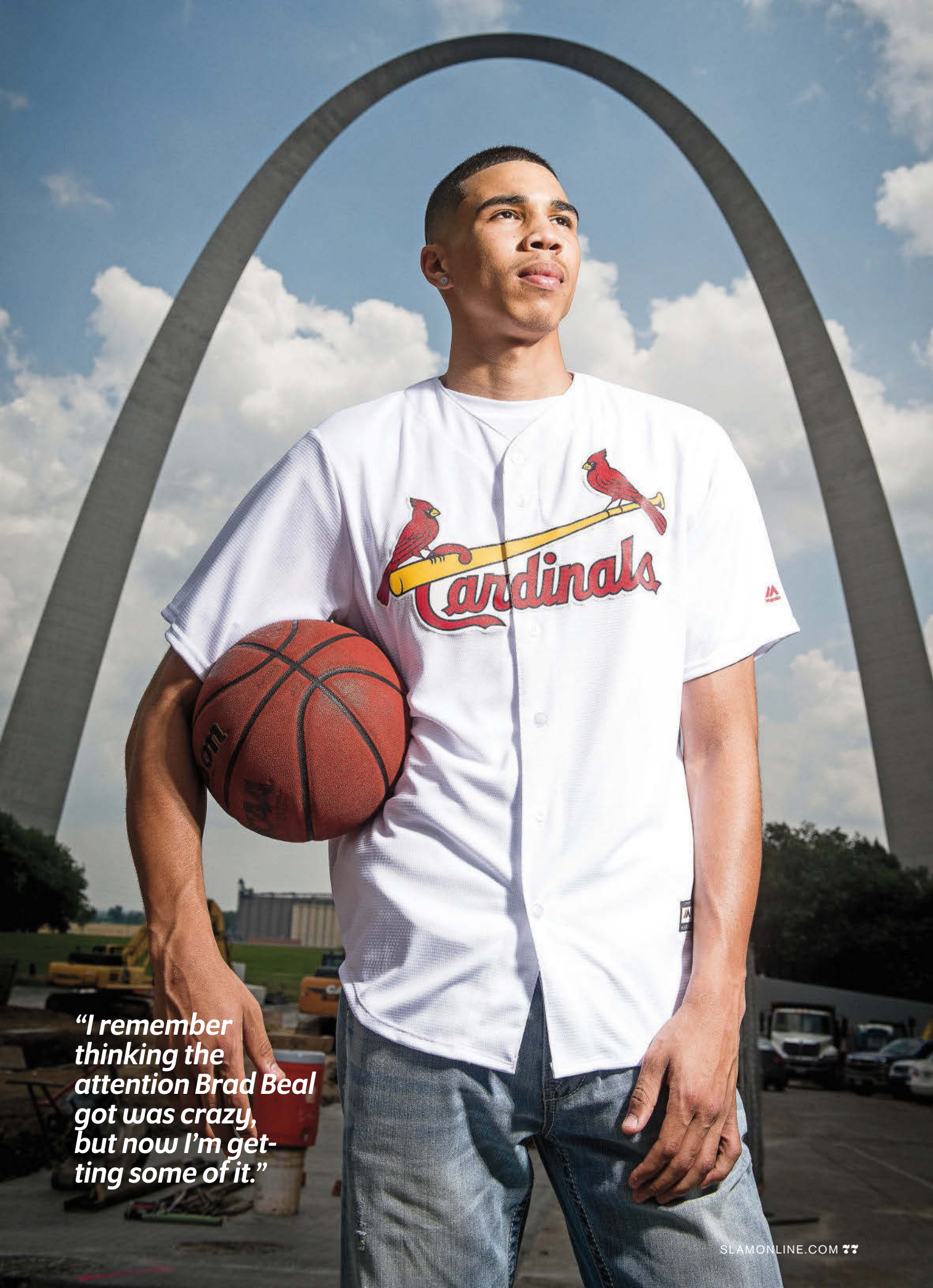
The summer that followed, Justin landed the head coaching position at his alma mater Christian Brothers College HS after six years at Soldan High. CBC is Chaminade's conference rival and naturally Justin wanted his son to join him. Ultimately, preferring to not leave Jayson's eligibility in the hands of the state association and risk him sitting out his entire sophomore year per transfer rules, both decided that staying put was best—even if it meant going up against each other twice a year. "It's tough and frustrating, and it's something I wish no dad would have to be a part of," says Justin, who won the state title his first year with CBC while Jayson holds a 3-1 all-time record in the series. "It's not a good feeling for either one of us but we've made the best of it."

As a sophomore and junior, Jayson averaged around 26 points and 11 rebounds each year, gaining notoriety for his ability to play every position between the 1 and the 4, earning two straight Gatorade State POY awards and drawing comparisons to Kevin Durant.

The day of our shoot is Jayson's only full day in The Loo in a one-month span after spending the prior four days in Memphis working out with Penny Hardaway. He was set to leave for Colorado Springs the following morning to join USA Basketball's U19 squad, which would head to Greece for two weeks after a 10-day training camp.

"It's something you get adjusted to quickly if you want to be great," he says of the summer grind. "Especially if you're trying to go where I want to be."





"I remember thinking the attention Brad Beal got was crazy, but now I'm getting some of it."

PUNKS



AMBITIONZ

MJ CAGE
Santa Ana (CA) Mater Dei, 6-9, F

As he watched the NBA Finals, MJ Cage couldn't help imagining himself in the shoes of the Splash Brothers. No, he doesn't rain threes like Steph Curry and Klay Thompson, but he's got something even more rare in common with the Warriors' title-winning duo. "A lot of people can't really relate to my situation," he says, "but we're kind of in the same circumstances."

That circumstance is a rare and enviable one. Like Steph and Klay, MJ—make that Michael Jr—is the son of Michael Cage, the 15-year NBA vet best known for his rebounding, defense and epic Jheri curl in stints with the Sonics and Clippers. MJ has inherited much from his dad, not least his size—6-9, 220—and knack for controlling things in the paint. The best advice Pops gave him? "Just to play hard, because that's what he did," MJ says. "He played hard every night, and that's how he got all those rebounds, doing the work that nobody else wanted to do. I like playing defense, blocking shots, rebounding—I think it kind of rubbed off from him."

A top-75 prospect in the 2016 class and a standout at perennial SoCal power Mater Dei, MJ might well follow his father's example at the next level: His short list includes dad's alma mater, San Diego State, where his sister Alexis plays volleyball. The Aztecs will have to hold off interest from Arizona and Kentucky, among others, so competition will be stiff. Wherever he ends up, it's clear from Cage's bloodlines that he's built for this.**—RYAN JONES**

RARE GEM

DESTINY SLOCUM **Meridian (ID) Mountain View, 5-7, G**

In 2014, few people east of the Mississippi River knew about Destiny Slocum. She quickly changed that as she burst onto the recruiting scene last summer with stellar performances on the AAU circuit, allowing her to introduce herself. Now she's considered one of the best point guards, if not the best, in the Class of 2016.

"More schools started recruiting me other than the Pac-12," Slocum said. "That's why it's important to have a lot of exposure."

Using the breakout summer as momentum, she led the Mountain View Mavericks to their first state title win, quieting the haters with averages of 25.1 ppg, 5.6 apg and 5.3 rpg, and earning Idaho Gatorade State POY honors in the process.

"It felt like an accomplishment, it's something I've worked for since my freshman year. Kids told me I wouldn't do it at Mountain View," she says of the championship and accolades.

Slocum can create her own shot with ease, pull up for the mid-range jumper, and hit Steph Curry-like deep threes. But it's in the open court where she thrives the most, able to use her playmaking abilities to set up teammates and get the crowd on its feet.

"It gives me an electric feeling to have the fans in it, the team, and most importantly yourself," she says. "It's the feeling that can only be felt on the court."**—TY HAWKINS**



Kelly Kline, AP Photo/Otto Kitsinger, Atiba Jefferson, Steve Ryan Photography, Francois Nel/Getty Images



BASKETBALL DIARY
JAYSON TATUM

Hey, what's up y'all? It's Jayson Tatum and this is my very first diary. Hope you guys like it.

I'm in Greece right now at the U19 FIBA World Championships. This is my third straight year playing for USA Basketball. We're 2-0 right now. I'm just enjoying the experience—having fun doing a bunch of things in another country.

It's really an honor to represent the USA for a third straight year and getting to travel the world. I never thought I'd ever be able to put on a USA Basketball jersey until it happened. Last year, I went to Dubai with the U17 team and the year before we went to Uruguay with the U16 team.

I'm rooming with Harry Giles. We've been roommates all three years and basically are best friends at this point. We're like brothers.

Everyone on the team is cool. I'd say LJ Peak and Justin Bibbs are probably the two clowns on the team in terms of jokesters.

This year, if we win the whole thing, we get to take a private plane back home so that's definitely what we are looking forward to the most.

I feel like we've been doing pretty well. I had a breakout game today (22 points) against Croatia. I'm just really focused on winning the gold medal.

When I return, I'll be home for two days and then will go straight to the Nike Peach Jam in South Carolina to play for my St. Louis Eagles team. We ranked second coming out of the EYBL regular season this spring. We were 13-4 and lost some games that we shouldn't have lost but I like our chances going into the EYBL Finals. It's the biggest stage—it's either show up or go home!

Also when I return, I plan on announcing my college decision. I'm definitely thinking about my decision while I'm away over here. When I get back, probably in a week or two I'll decide.

I'm announcing my decision before my senior year because I didn't want to waste anybody's time. I knew what schools I was really interested in, and so I just wanted to put that out there so that I don't have coaches that I really wasn't thinking about calling me and coming to see me.

But for now all I'm really thinking about is bringing back home a third straight gold medal!

Until next time!

ROCK NATION



HOWARD WASHINGTON JR Montverde (FL) Academy, 6-3, PG

Howard Washington Jr was the last player chosen on his first team. And he loved it. As a 6-year-old, Washington Jr's first opportunity was playing on an 10-and-under team coached by his father, Howard Sr, at McCarthy Park in Buffalo. Father and son won the championship, and the youngest member of the squad was named MVP.

More titles have followed. This past season, the 6-3, 180-pound PG helped guide national power Montverde to a 31-1 record and a third consecutive DICK's Sporting Goods High School National Championship. A major part of Washington Jr's success is his ability to be a second coach on the floor.

"He sees the game the way a coach does," says Jimmy Hart, Washington Jr's Albany City Rocks AAU coach. He says Washington Jr fits the mold of a Mark Jackson or Tyler Ennis. Washington Jr is a steady ballhandler, above-average shooter and can fracture defenses in pick-and-rolls, and he'll hone those skills even more when he gets to Butler, where he just committed. "I'm getting more focused in the weight room and getting stronger," he says. "[Montverde] Coach [Kevin] Boyle and my dad are after me. They've definitely seen my intensity increase." **–MAX DELSIGNORE**



PRINCE

VJ KING
Fairfax (VA) Paul VI, 6-7, F

LeBron isn't the only King to have laced 'em up for Akron (OH) St. Vincent-St. Mary's. Eighteen-year-old Akron native Vincent "VJ" King played his freshman and sophomore seasons at the famed Catholic school before taking his talents to Paul VI in Fairfax, VA.

As a junior, the 6-7 small forward averaged 18.5 ppg and led the Panthers to a 20-15 record, including seven wins in their final 10 outings. King combines a 7-foot wingspan and cashmoneyrecords jumper with the ability to finish at the rim with contact. Those attributes came in handy en route to averages of 14 points and 5 boards during his spring AAU season with DMV-based Team Takeover.

This summer, the five-star recruit is working out, paying special attention to his handle and watching a lot of tape, figuring out which moves would've worked better and where he could've attacked instead of settling for a J.

After being wooed by nearly every major program, King verbally committed to Louisville on June 12. "If I knew where I was going, I didn't want to wait out of respect for the coaches," he says.

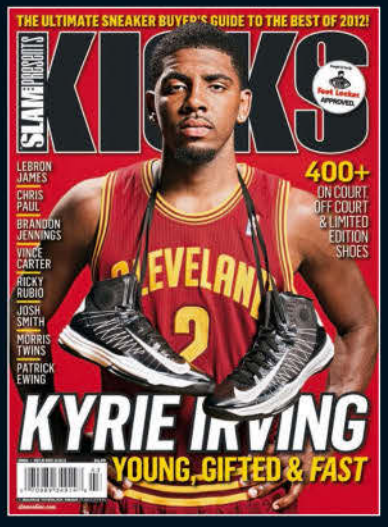
King will be called upon to get buckets for Louisville immediately, but we'll have to wait upwards of a year to see him in Cardinal red and black, and even longer until he potentially matches up with Akron's other King. **–ELI SCHWADRON**

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THE ORIGINAL SNEAKER BIBLE IS COMING!

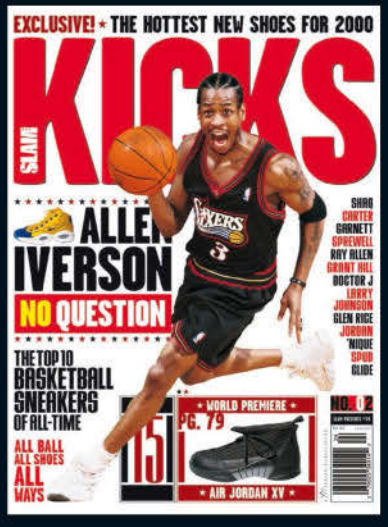












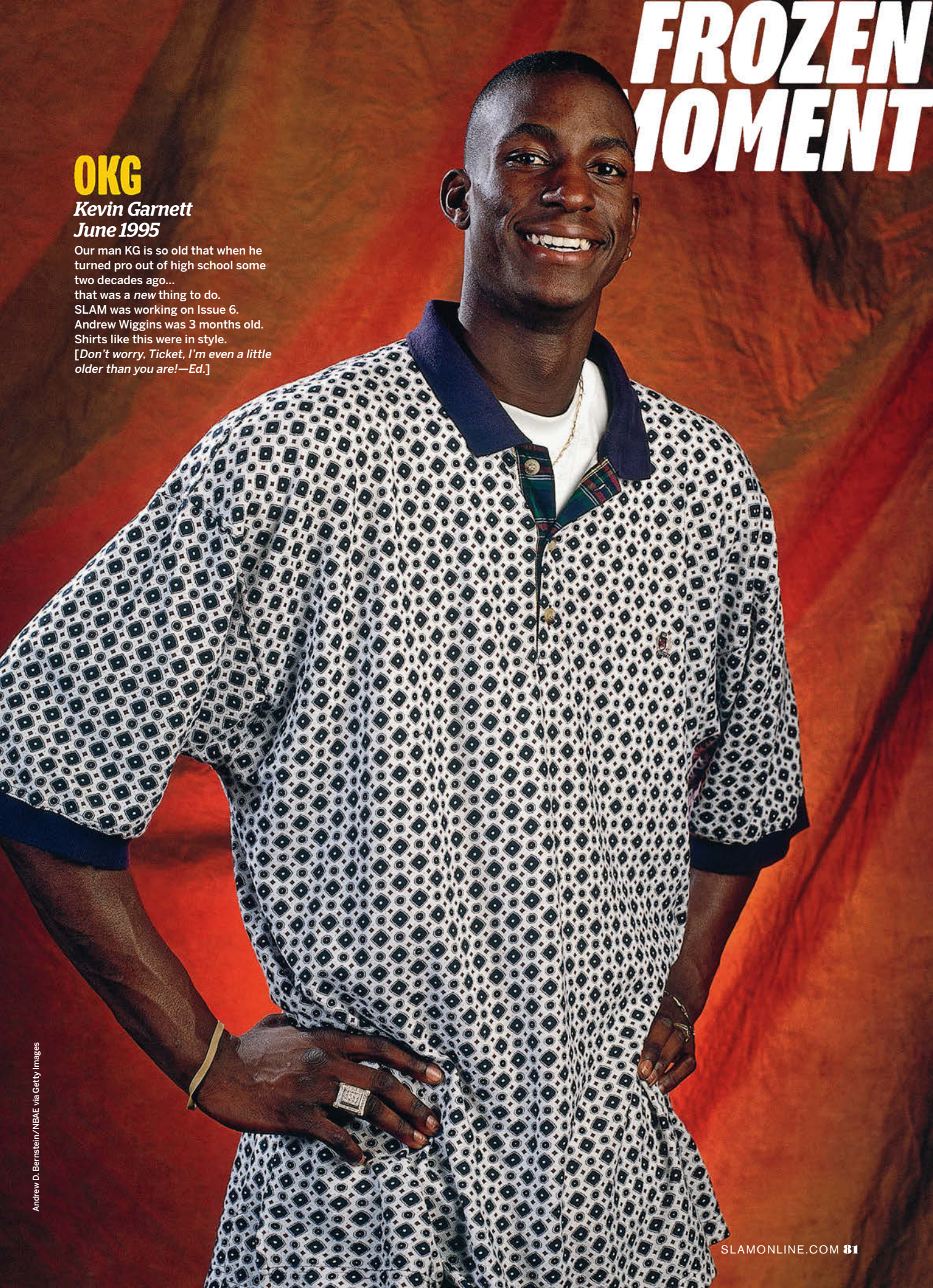
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FROZEN MOMENT

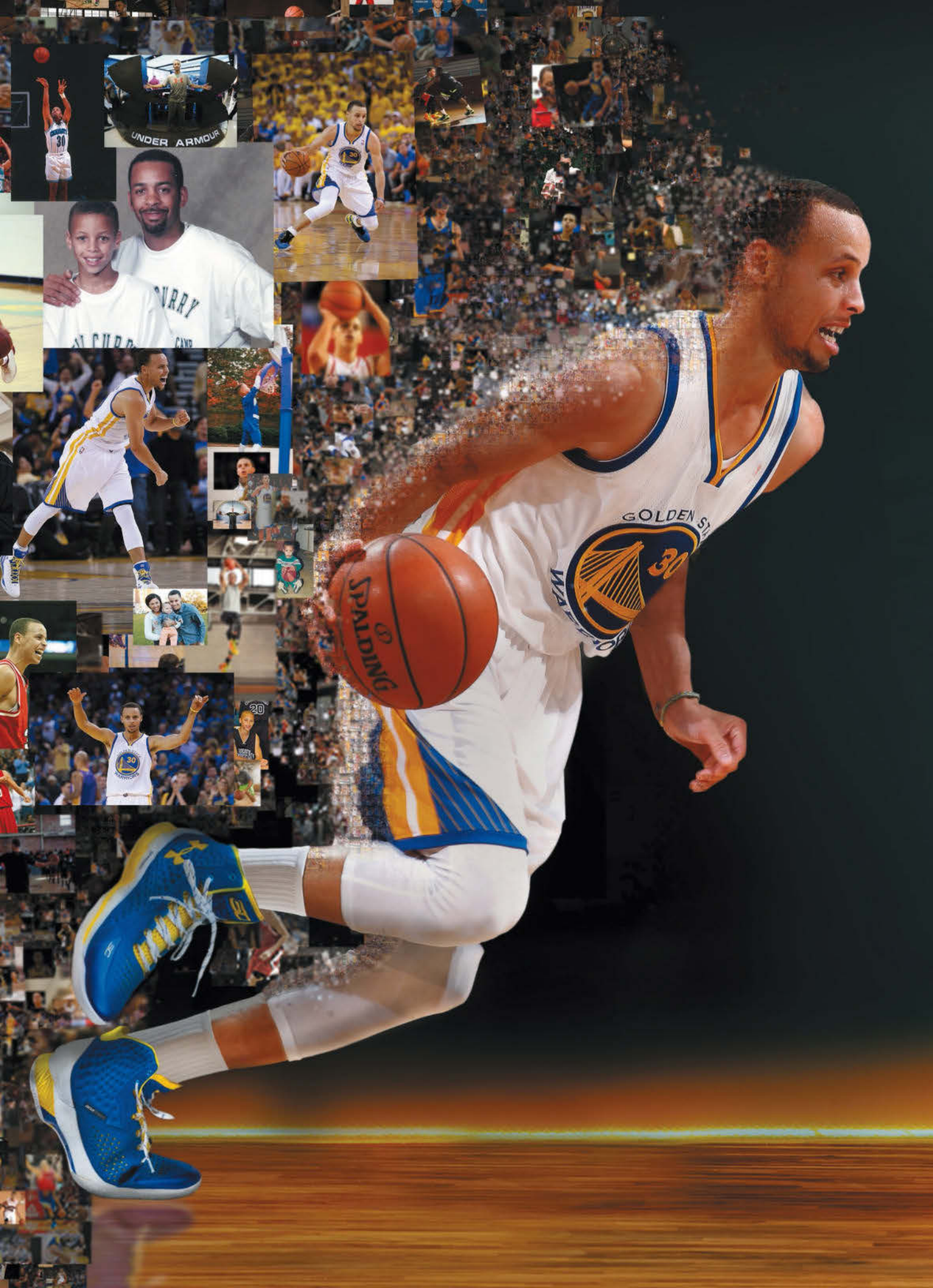


OKG

Kevin Garnett
June 1995

Our man KG is so old that when he turned pro out of high school some two decades ago... that was a *new* thing to do. SLAM was working on Issue 6. Andrew Wiggins was 3 months old. Shirts like this were in style. [*Don't worry, Ticket, I'm even a little older than you are!—Ed.*]

Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images


UNDER ARMOUR
SPALDING
GOLDEN

UNDER ARMOUR.



CURRY ONE

CHARGED BY BELIEF.

Stephen Curry's path wasn't lined with people saying he was great. He had to rely on the Will, Skill, and Belief inside him. Grinding every day…shot after shot after shot.

AND NOW, HE'S WRITING HIS OWN STORY.

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